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DELL

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

This Month's Novel

HIRED GUNS AND BADLANDS BEEF

By Tom W. Blackburn

RIDE NO MORE

By Frank Gruber

"Where will I sleep tonight"? Elena asked.

Hired Guns and Badlands Beef, Chap. 4

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

Vol. 4, No. 9—November, 1950

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Cover picture by Earl Sherwan—Frontispiece by John Murray—
Back cover: "Frankie and Johnny," a painting by George Prout

Published monthly by

DELL PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.

George T. Delacorte, Jr., *President* • Helen Meyer, *Vice-President* • Albert P. Delacorte, *Vice-President*
261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.

by arrangement with THE HAWLEY PUBLICATIONS, INC. Re-entered as second class matter July 2, 1947, at the post office at New York, New York, under the act of March 3, 1879. Additional second class entry at the post office at Racine, Wisconsin. Printed in the U.S.A.

Copyright, 1950, by The Hawley Publications, Inc.
Address all subscriptions to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, 261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y., or to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, Poughkeepsie, New York. Address all manuscripts and editorial correspondence to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, Racine, Wisconsin. Single copy, 25c; yearly subscription (12 issues) $3.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, and in the countries of the Pan-American Union; $4.00 in foreign countries, (no Canadian subscriptions accepted). Editor: Don Ward. Advisory editor: Stephen Slesinger. Designed and produced by Western Printing & Lithographing Company.

THIS MONTH'S COMPLETE NOVEL: *HIRED GUNS AND BADLANDS BEEF*

MARC CHALLON, *owner of the huge XO Ranch, faces big trouble when his beautiful but arrogantly ambitious wife Marcy tells him that she wants a divorce—and that she and Anson Prentice, the Chicago millionaire who is her lover, also want the XO. Marc Challon's ready agreement surprises Marcy and her lover; it startles and shocks Marc's aged father, Pierre Challon. But Marc is playing a deep game; when old Pierre has left for Denver to drown his rage and shame in a colossal binge and Marc and his faithful XO riders are camped on the lava* malpais, *he figures he is ready to show his first card. He learns then that Marcy, too, knows how to play rough; her own XO crew, recruited from Billy Bonney's Lincoln County gunmen and ramrodded by Cy Van Cleave, "the rattlesnake of Mora," strikes back ruthlessly at Marc, his riders, and the hard-bitten "lava men" with whom Marc has formed an alliance. The cunning, slippery Van Cleave delivers one telling blow after another, finally tolling Marc Challon into a deadly trap. Marcy, discovering that Cy Van Cleave has irons of his own in the fire and that Anson Prentice is made of too soft stuff for a finish fight, makes a new "alliance" of her own. At last, Elena Casamajor, the Spanish-American girl who loves Marc Challon and the grasslands which have shaped him, brings back the aged giant, Pierre, to direct the forces of right and justice in the showdown against Van Cleave and his gun-hawk regiment.*

Tom W. Blackburn has rewarded his readers with a tremendously exciting story of rangeland intrigue and breathtaking action, of human greed and passion, flaming loves and steady loyalties.

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This December issue will be on sale about November 1

Hired Guns *and* Badlands Beef

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

Chapter One

Coyote Bait

THE ranch office was harshly lighted by the slanting sun. Grit was in the air—the fabric of something whole and perfect, fallen in chards. Marc Challon's eyes traveled the walls, seeking refuge from the explosive tightness behind their lids. A rack of ancient pottery from a prehistoric Indian encampment on the upper limits of the XO. Priceless Navajo hangings. Apache saddle gear. A bronze Spanish bit and chains. A flintlock rifle uncovered by a flash flood in Dry Wash. The patina of familiarity, with which the room had long been glossed.

There had once before been this disbelief, this numbness, this anger—the day his mother died. A man could be stunned beyond conscious thought, hurt beyond bitterness. He could strike back when the striking back was instinctive. Then the blow was past. He closed his wounds as best he could, staying on his feet and thinking of retaliation.

"All right," Challon said quietly. "All right, Marcy, what do you want?"

"A divorce primarily, of course. The rest isn't too complicated, Marc."

Her voice was steady, her head uptilted, too assured for defiance. Beautiful—young and sure and beautiful as the night she had contrived a meeting between them in Trinidad. Beautiful as the day they were married in the living-room at the other end of the hall with all the XO crowded into the big house to see a new mistress take over the Challon keys.

Five years here on the grass had not changed the smoothness of her cheeks, the strong curve of her full lips, the sultry somberness of her eyes; her figure and her imperious, feline carriage. And the quality of her determination had not changed. Determination and self-devotion he had humored, even encouraged, because it made her more than a woman—an adversary, constant and challenging. Of the three facing Challon in this room, she alone was unafraid. He looked at her and waited with a patience which was no part of him.

"Really very simple," Marcy went on quietly. "We want the ranch."

Challon had expected this since he had first learned about Marcy and Anson Prentice an hour ago, and a remote and frigid corner of his mind had framed an answer. A corner of his mind apart from shock and hurt and devouring anger. A part of him which fully understood he now had left only that with which he had begun—the XO—that he would have to be shrewd and hard, trading with the devil and with Marcy herself, to keep intact the ranch which had been Challon life for two generations.

He had loved this woman, lived with her, and it was hard to understand how little of her he had really known. Within herself she was not wrong but implacably right. It wasn't Anson Prentice she wanted, just as it had never been Marc Challon. She wanted the XO, the vastness and strength and power which was rooted here on the grass. She knew nothing of the land, the people of which the Challons and the XO were a part. She didn't need to know them. She was inflexible and invincible. Nothing could destroy Marcy but Marcy herself.

Challon looked at them all again. Pierre's stricken eyes were the worst. Old Pierre Challon, now well into the home stretch of a century of living. A hundred and eighty pounds of man in boots and broadcloth still, ducking unconsciously under the high lintels of the XO doorways as he passed through them. If the ranch had a personality, Pierre was its incarnation. Rheumy and a little forgetful, but still the Pierre Challon who had homesteaded the first square mile of the XO when the nearest town was Trinidad and the nearest house the mud palace of the Maxwells, a county away.

Pierre believed in women. He had believed in this woman. He didn't fully understand what was here before his eyes and Marc could not explain to him. Marcy wanted the ranch. That she must also take the excuse for a man's existence—the dreams of the living and the dead alike—meant nothing to her.

"It would be simpler to kill Anse," Challon said quietly.

"You're joking!"

"No, Marcy; I'm not joking."

Anson Prentice flushed. Challon had never liked the man's thin face. "Patrician," Marcy called the high, oval head, the prehensile nose, the too-narrow cheekbones. Challon had a better

word for it, from the stock pens. Overbred—the inevitable fault of a good strain. And Prentice trying to correct it for future generations at Challon expense!

"It would be a hell of a lot simpler to kill Anse," Challon said again.

The sick look in Pierre's eyes receded. He rose from his chair and pulled a heavy old revolver from a drawer in the desk, handing it to his son matter-of-factly, almost without malice.

"Take the rabbit outside," he said gravely. "Your mother never liked blood in the house."

Challon held the gun loosely. It *would* be easy. Marcy had awaited the right time; Prentice had schemed with her—both deliberately. There was justification for Prentice's death here and Challon thought perhaps he owed it to Pierre and to himself. But there was also the XO, bigger than any of them and more important.

"You'd hang, Marc," Marcy said dispassionately. "You owe Anson money. Even in New Mexico a man can't kill his creditors."

Challon had been thinking of money, also, of what it meant to development of the XO. Marcy talked of debts and he thought of what these two facing him here owed him.

"I borrowed sixty thousand dollars from Anse to put in a dam on Torrentado," he agreed slowly. "Gave him an assignment of thirty percent of the ranch as security. If I don't pay off my note he'll own that much of the XO. Suppose I concede you half of what's left, Marcy, seeing as Pierre deeded it to us last year. I had five years with you; they were worth something. That would give you thirty-five percent and a like share for me. What's it stand up to—say two dollars an acre for the hundred thousand acres inside of XO fence? Worth three times that if you could find big enough a buyer."

Pierre was incredulous but Marcy and Prentice leaned eagerly forward. Challon's lips tightened. Both were outlanders. They couldn't know how coyotes were baited in this country.

"Since I haven't let the contracts on the dam yet, Anse's money is still in the operating account," Challon continued. "I want two dollars an acre for the share I hold, the way I just split it up, and all the cash in the ranch accounts. A hundred and thirty thousand total. My pick of the breeding stock to a hundred head. My personal horses. And life tenancy on the ranch for Pierre, if he wants it. I can climb the fence. Maybe he can't."

Pierre was without color or voice. Relief left Anson Prentice a little breathless. Marcy carefully weighed what she had heard.

"I thought we'd have to fight, Marc," she said. "I didn't think you'd listen to money. So the old order changes, even in New Mexico!"

"New?" Challon asked bluntly. "Rich men have been buying women of a kind since we first started counting beads for money. When the agreements are drawn, have Treadwell send them over to the hotel in Range. I'll be there. And, Pierre, don't forget nobody ever won a pot on the first draw in a poker game. Have Pepe drive you into town tomorrow. I want to talk to you."

Pierre nodded woodenly. Challon crossed to the door.

"Don't think a quarter of a million dollars makes a man, Marcy," he told his wife. "You've been used to a couple samples of the real thing here on the

XO. Be careful how you live out here till you're legally cut loose from me. Talk raises hell with friends in this country and you're going to need more friends than you've got Prentice dollars!"

Marcy followed him out onto the wide *ramada* outside. "Marc, what are you going to do?" she asked.

Challon let a surprised note creep into his voice. "Do? Why what I've always done. Pierre filed in here to build a ranch. I've been working for the biggest and best whiteface herd in the country. My wife and a man I thought was my friend have set me back a little today, but that's still what I intend to work for. Not even you can change that, Marcy!"

She eyed him without self-condemnation. Her wariness was marked. He thought she knew him better than he had known her.

"Marc, that talk of friends—" she asked. "Do we have to be enemies?"

This, blandly, after the hour from which he had just escaped! Challon smiled unpleasantly.

"Us, enemies—you and me? No, honey, never—"

He bent unexpectedly and kissed her in a way which could leave her no doubt as to his insolent, mocking intent. Grinning at Prentice, who had appeared uncertainly in the doorway, he turned down the steps and swung across the yard toward the corrals at an easy, unhurried pace.

Challon reached Range, seat of Red River County and XO supply point at the New Mexico base of Boundary Mesa, late in the afternoon. The clerk in the lobby of the Range Hotel rang a key down on his counter.

"Thought you just got in from Kansas City this morning, Mr. Challon. What's the matter—beds all full at the ranch?"

Challon shattered the boy's easy familiarity with a look, pocketed the key, and returned angrily to the street. The remark could have been innocent—misguided affability. It could have been something else. There was no gossip in Range; only complete ignorance on a subject or equally complete public knowledge. What was worth talking about was worth knowing about. Most folks kept themselves well informed. Challon had this time been gone three weeks from the XO and he had been unsuspecting. He hadn't thought about talk.

He saw Hugh Perigord tipped back in a wire-braced chair under the awning before his office in the courthouse. Challon crossed the street.

"'Evening, Marc," Perigord offered.

"I thought you ought to know, Hugh," Challon said without preface. "I sold out of the XO this afternoon."

Perigord's was a rigorous trade. Fatalism was his fetish, stoniness half of his stock in trade, imperturbability his tradition, but it cost him an effort to remain motionless, now, idly canted back in his chair. He could not keep incredulity from his eyes.

"To Prentice?" he asked needlessly. "Moving your family to town?"

"I said I sold out—wagon, tongue, and traces." It was blunt, answering all questions. Perigord understood. "Somebody could have told me, Hugh," Challon continued steadily. "I been gone a lot this spring."

"Nobody could have told you. Suicide to try. You wouldn't have believed it. Changed nothing if you had."

Challon thought of Marcy. "Reckon not," he agreed. "Look, Hugh, I want

no talk."

Perigord eyed Challon's frame, his big, loosely hung, long-fingered hands. He smiled drily.

"Won't be any. Not while you're around."

"Hugh, remember the Casamajors—used to own everything north of the Maxwell place? Think one was a governor under Spain. Isn't there a couple of the girls still around?"

A wicked little light came up in Perigord's eyes. "Recollect one married a homesteader, out in the lava—"

"Sure, Jim Pozner," Challon growled impatiently. "That's one. Ought to be another."

"There is and you'd know it if you hadn't stayed married so hard while you was at it. Elena. Prettiest thing in Range, but unfriendly as hell. Won't do yourself any good with her, Marc. Been tried by experts. She'd rather live in a back room at the Uncle Dick, up on Goat Hill, washing dishes and singing a couple songs in the dining-room Saturday nights, than take up with the best man in town. Funny how long it takes pride to run down in one of those old Spanish families."

"Didn't figure on doing myself good," Challon said. "Had about all the woman I can use for a while. Just wanted to see her. Thanks, Hugh."

Perigord frowned. "Now you're off the XO, Marc, what do you do?"

"Get some grass, raise some stock—that's my business."

Perigord leaned further forward, concerned. "Sure. But where? That's mine!"

Challon shrugged. "Depends on where I can make the best deal. See you later, Hugh."

He swung on up the walk in the direction of Goat Hill, aware that he had shattered the evening's tranquility for the sheriff of Red River County.

Chapter Two

"The Boys Are Ringy, Marc!"

RANGE was a typical grasslands trading-center, fused of convenience, turning wheels, and alkaline dust—but assembled in reverse. The low end of the street contained the business establishments and half a dozen clapboard pretensions to circumstance which housed the families of the leading citizens. Above these, on the talus of the slope footing Boundary Mesa, were the shacks of Chihuahua-town and such divertissements as Range could offer. The highest point was the rocky summit of Goat Hill.

Challon turned into the Uncle Dick Bar, using the dining-room entrance. The place was scrupulously clean and the Spanish affection for lacey white curtains was apparent. There was no trade in the place. Challon took a table. An old woman came from the kitchen, smiling friendliness. Speaking the easy Spanish of the grass, Challon ordered a meal. He stopped the old woman as she turned away.

"*Momentito, mamasita,* I want to see Elena, too. Elena Casamajor."

The old woman's friendliness vanished. "Dinner is forty cents," she said stiffly. "I serve it; you eat it. Then go away. To Chihuahua-town, maybe. We have only food here. You leave the little one be!"

"You know me?" Challon asked sharply. "Yes. And you heard me? Good! Tell 'Lena I want to see her.

And bring me a bottle of Roanoke whisky from next door."

There was anger in the old woman but the Challon name sat with Marc at the table and the shadow of the XO moved with him. She paused uncertainly, entreaty in her eyes. He thought she would voice it but she did not, turning and leaving the room soundlessly. She came back with a bottle. Challon broke the seal, poured a glass, and pushed it aside barely tasted. His dinner came and he ate.

He was breathing the strong chicory fumes of his second cup of coffee when the girl for whom he had sent came into the room. He realized that while he ate, she had dressed for him. Thick jet hair was coiled in a low knot against the base of her neck, accentuating the slender ovality of her face. Contrary to custom among her sisters, her blouse was collared high and primly. She was not tall, but there was liquid grace to her movements.

Perigord had remarked on the long-lived pride of the Spanish. It did not live so long in some, but it certainly was alive in Elena Casamajor. Unfamiliar compulsion brought Challon to his feet. He slid out a chair and she slipped gracefully into it. As he reseated himself her glance touched the bottle of whisky. She smiled.

"No champagne, *Señor* Challon?" she asked. Challon was startled.

"Champagne? Order it," he invited defensively. "Why champagne?"

"To have Marc Challon come asking for me!" The girl laughed softly.

"We better get this straight—why I came here."

"Perhaps I almost know," Elena Casamajor answered. "I pay you the compliment of thinking your reason different from most of the others. Otherwise you would have waited for me until you were too drunk or sleepy to have waited longer."

Challon felt relieved. He leaned toward her. "I want to have a talk with your uncle and some of his friends. A more peaceable kind of a talk than I'd be apt to have with them if I went out to see them alone."

"Jim Pozner?" she asked. "His wife —Tia—is my aunt. All the family I have, now. But Jim isn't my uncle. Just the man she married. Why should the XO ranch want to talk to him, now? It's been easy, before. There were always enough guns to make Jim stand still—if you could find him."

"This time it isn't the XO—just Marc Challon, with some business that should interest your uncle and his friends."

"They'd be interested in your funeral; not much else."

"Not even in the fact I sold the XO to Anson Prentice—that my wife is divorcing me to marry him?"

The girl's color faded sharply. "That woman will have the ranch, now—without a Challon on it?"

Challon was astonished at the genuine distress in her tone. She started to say something else but broke off as a hard-riding man flung down outside and banged the door open. Marc had been half expecting this arrival and he grinned.

Hank Bayard was the most obvious man alive. He stopped beside the table to shoot a sharp glance at the girl and a sharper one at Challon. Nor did he miss the bottle of whisky. His quick estimate of the situation was so open that even the girl smiled.

"What the hell is this, Marc?" Bayard demanded. "Perigord told me I'd find you up here. Prentice came down

to the bunkshack tonight and told us he's taken over the ranch!"

"That's right."

"But Marcy—Mrs. Challon's still out there."

"Makes it plain enough, doesn't it?"

Bayard swore expressively, without apology to the girl. He tossed his hat onto the table, revealing the brim-shaded whiteness of his foreskull in startling contrast to the ruddy tan of his face. A range man looked naked bareheaded.

"Beat a woman, Marc, but don't give her satisfaction!" Bayard growled. "Marcy and Prentice have got no claim to the XO. You picked a hell of a place to lie down!"

"You handle your women, Hank," Challon said mildly. "Leave mine to me."

"Sure. None of my business. But no woman's worth the XO!"

"You're sure of that?" Elena Casamajor murmured in Spanish. Hank glared at her. Challon touched his foreman's arm.

"Prentice making any changes in the crew?"

"He'll have to! Every jack rode into town with me. The boys are ringy over this, Marc."

"You saddled Perigord with a chore, bringing the boys in here when they're in a mood."

Bayard grimaced. "It ain't worrying Hugh as much as the chore he's afraid you're fixing to toss in his lap. He's afraid you're going to move out into the lava. Now wouldn't that raise the devil!"

"Yeah," Challon agreed. "I came out of this with about a hundred and thirty thousand dollars in cash, Hank. Prentice has got maybe a million, if we count his old man and a hunk of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe. And he's got the XO, for now. You and the boys want to stick around and see how long the Challons stay off their land?"

"What about Marcy?" Bayard asked. Thought of one woman seemed to link all others in his mind. He glanced again at Elena Casamajor.

"I don't take my women second-hand, Hank—any of them!"

Bayard stood up. "I took orders from Pierre Challon before I could set a saddle. When you got big enough to whip me, I started taking them from you. This seems like a hell of a poor time to stop, Marc."

"I've got a hundred head of blood stock coming off the ranch. You know the ones I want."

"I won't leave a stock-show ribbon on the place!" Bayard grinned and reached for his hat.

"And my saddle string. Move the works out to the springs at Tinaja."

"So Perigord was right!" Bayard's lips compressed. "Jim Pozner and the Hyatts and a dozen others been waiting a long time out there in the lava for a good bite of Challon meat. Pierre's run 'em and you've run 'em and they haven't forgot. They been itching for a chance to swing on you, Marc!"

"They'll never have a better one, then," Challon said. "I'll be tied up two or three days more here in town. Keep the boys corked till then."

Hank scowled protest, as though this was an impossible order, but he turned wordlessly and left the room. Challon smiled. They didn't grow buckos in the lava big enough to spook Hank Bayard into a piece of trouble contrary to orders. It would be quiet at Tinaja until his own arrival. He turned his atten-

tion back to the girl.

"You'll go alone to see Jim if I don't go with you?" she asked.

"I have before," Challon assented. "And I can make him listen. This is different and I didn't want to do it that way, but I can."

The girl nodded. "I suppose so. You'd try, anyway. And it would mean trouble for my aunt." She paused thoughtfully. "If I talked to them first they might at least listen to you. Look, *Señor* Challon, you told Hank Bayard about a lot of money, knowing I would hear. Did you think I would be interested in it?"

"Why not? It interested me plenty this afternoon or I probably would have shot a man on my own *ramada*."

"There are other things more important to me than even a great deal of money. Something else—you spoke to Hank Bayard about second-handed women. He made a mistake. I don't want you to make the same one."

"I'm not," Challon told her. "I trusted the wrong kind of a woman once. I wouldn't do that again, even to talk to the devil himself!"

Elena rose. "It's late. I want to save Tia all the trouble I can. When you're ready to leave for Tinaja, send me a horse. I'll go with you—"

Pierre showed up in Range at midmorning, riding a shiny XO top-buggy with his own trotter between the shafts and Pepe Sheep Man unobtrusively riding the little platform over the rear axle. Thus Pierre and the San Juan Indian who had been his constant companion for half a century met the letter of Challon's instructions that his father have Pepe drive him to town. Pierre was in his best suit, a heavy, dust-green broadcloth older than Marc's recollections. It hung flawlessly on Pierre's great frame, hiding the sagging stoop of his shoulders and thirty years of his age.

A full-crown Stetson broadbrim sat at a careless angle across Pierre's rusty-white mane, and belted under the long tail of his coat was a magnificently embroidered Mexican holster containing the revolver which for the last ten years Pierre had worn only upon local election days. As the buggy halted, Pepe trotted around from in back. Pierre handed him the reins and disdained the fragile iron bracket of the buggy step as he swung down. Challon met him on the walk and gestured toward the hotel.

"Suppose we go up to my room."

Pierre Challon fixed watery eyes on his son. "I never hit town a day in my life that I didn't buy a drink before I knocked the dust from my hat. There ain't a better place to talk than a saloon."

Challon grinned. Pierre waved at Pepe Sheep Man. As the buggy rolled on past Challon saw luggage lashed to its rear deck. He said nothing. Pierre moved toward the dilapidated front of the Red River Saloon. A metropolis might eventually engulf Range, but to Pierre Challon there would only be one place where a man could buy an honest drink. The Red River had been the first bar; it had to be the best.

As they entered the place Challon briefly remembered an almost forgotten time on the XO—a time when his mother was still alive, small and soft of voice. A woman with enormous eyes whose love for Pierre Challon was a

worship of a thundering and occasionally unkind god. A time when the thick-walled house she had built on the XO was so new that the interior wash on the 'dobe of the walls cracked with each change of season. A time when Challon himself was still a boy, nearly as tall as his father, but not quite a man. His mother had forbidden him to enter the Red River.

With its cracked mirrors, unsilvered and smudged with time, its faded paintings and patched chairs and scarred bar, it seemed only untidy and innocuous enough, now. But legend lived in its dark interior. With the Lambert Hotel at Cimarron and the Clifton House on the Canadian, the Red River had seen its share of the Territory's history in days when talk was not of rails but wagon wheels, rolling down out of Kansas for Santa Fe.

Marc rang a coin down on the bar when drinks were served. Pierre hastily matched it with one of his own.

"I'm drinking none of your whisky!" he said sharply.

"You pull in your horns," Marc counseled gently.

"Got none to pull in any more!" Pierre growled. "That's the hell of getting old. Otherwise, right this minute you'd be stiffer'n a board from a damned good fist-mauling and locked in the spud cellar till you'd learned better. And I'd be hazing a couple no-good critters off our land!"

"Without doing the XO any real good. We've never tackled a problem exactly the same way, Pierre."

"No, by hell! One of us has got whiskers on his chest!"

"You take it easy; let me handle this. Your no-good critters will be running soon enough—and leaving something behind the XO can use."

"What?" the old man asked. "Tracks in the sand?"

"A railroad, maybe. The iron men to finish the dam on Torrentado and the irrigation system. With luck, some profit even over that."

"Talk! You're whipped clean out of the herd and I know it as well as you do. You wouldn't have laid down and let that sleazy walk the length of your backbone if there was any fight in you! I want to tell you something, Marc. I'd have given the XO to your mother, lock, stock, and barrel, any day she asked for it. But I wouldn't sell it to her sainted soul for another man's money! I haven't been so damned mad since you were born. I'm getting out. Pepe's going back to his pueblo and I'm catching the noon stage to Denver!"

"Marcy make it tough for you out at the ranch last night?" Challon asked with quick suspicion. Pierre missed the ominous note in his voice.

"Going to hire the biggest suite in the Albany at Denver and start tearing up the walks. When I've got this mad cut down to a size I can handle, maybe I'll come back and finish raising you—maybe I'll come back and learn you how to handle a woman. But till I do you leave me alone, boy. I want no part of you, now!"

Pierre banged his glass on the bar and strode out of the saloon. Challon glanced at the glass. There was no use following Pierre. He was in a monumental uproar when he'd walk away from untouched whisky. Besides, Challon thought the Denver trip a good solution to what might otherwise be a problem. It would keep Pierre out of the way here in the beginning, where he wouldn't fit. Later the fight might

become the kind on which the old man had cut his teeth. Pierre would lose his mad, then.

Chapter Three

"The Devil's in Me."

THE summons to Treadwell's law office came the second day, sooner than Challon expected. Marcy and Prentice were waiting in the dusty litter of the lawyer's inner room. Neither spoke but Prentice uncertainly followed Treadwell's lead, rising and offering his hand. Challon ignored it. Treadwell stumbled inarticulately.

"Maybe it don't make sense to you, Art, but it does to us," Challon told him. "Get on with it."

"You know there's going to be a divorce, Marc?" Treadwell asked.

"How much security you think I'd put up for a loan, Art—thirty percent of my ranch and my wife to boot? You're damned right there's going to be a divorce!"

Treadwell burrowed among his papers and lifted one, clearing his throat as though to read aloud. Prentice interrupted thinly.

"Cut it short, man!"

"Cut it all, Art," Challon corrected. "Let them write the ticket after I get out of here. Just hand across what you want me to sign."

"As your attorney, Marc—and your friend—" Treadwell was perspiring—"I advise you to sign nothing until—"

"As my attorney and my friend you handle this the way Marcy wants it."

Treadwell stiffened resignedly and pushed papers to Challon. He signed with a steady hand.

"The bank will transfer the XO balances to your private account," Treadwell said. "It has accepted Mr. Prentice's draft on his Chicago bank for the balance due you under the agreements."

Challon looked at Prentice mockingly. "Your old man's stock in the railroad looked pretty important to me when I invited you down to spend the spring with us, Anse. Wanted you to see why the Santa Fe had to touch Range on its way through. The loan seemed important, too, when you showed interest in my plans and offered me the money I needed for my irrigation system. None of it amounts to much now, does it?"

Prentice waited uneasily, knowing there was more.

"Just wondering about one thing, now," Challon went on. "I've got a lot of Prentice money in my pocket. Suppose I could raise much hell with the Santa Fe if I spent that money in the right places and the right way?"

"It takes a railroad man to cause a railroad trouble," Prentice said stiffly.

Challon grinned at him. "You get my point. I'm no railroad man, but I am a cattleman. And you're not. But you've got a big ranch on your hands now. And I don't like you, Anse. Not any!"

Still smiling, Challon stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind him. Marcy overtook him at the head of the stairs.

"That didn't become you, Marc—shaking a stick at Anson after we'd reached agreement!"

"Scared, Marcy?"

"Of you? No. I've lived with you and Pierre too long to be afraid of even the Challons. But you're being too agreeable. You're no martyr. Maybe

your pride is barked, but you're after something now which hasn't much to do with pride. Something you can put in your pocket."

"Learned it from you, honey," Challon said easily. "You love Anse less than you loved me. Where you think you're headed for, now?"

"I'm there," she said simply. "You've never known where I came from before I met you and I won't tell you now. But it was a long ways. This is the end of the climb, Marc. 'Mrs. Anson Prentice, who divides her time between the palatial Prentice mansion on Chicago's fashionable Prairie Avenue and her baronial cattle ranch in New Mexico Territory.'"

"Sure you're there?" Challon asked. Marcy's eyes narrowed.

"Don't make it a challenge, Marc," she warned. "The Challons have never had to fight a woman before and I'll fight if you force me."

She smiled. Challon turned and trotted briskly on down the stairs.

The lava was for a generation the eastern boundary of the XO—a thirty-mile wilderness lying against the Panhandle, haven like other forgotten badlands strips for swift travelers and the lawless. The volcano was the landmark of the lava, a geometrically perfect cone from which had been flung great solidified chunks of igneous brown stone which littered a quarter of the county. In the explosion which broadcast this giant rubble, the level sweep of the grass lands had buckled into ridge folds and upthrusts. Among these was the pyramidal spire of Tinaja.

There were scattered patches of grass in the lava and occasionally water. Beyond were the prairies again. It had been Marc Challon who had stretched an XO link through the lava to connect with more acreage beyond. What was sufficient empire in the days of wagons along the Old Trail to Santa Fe was too small with rails already surveying up Raton Creek.

Homesteaders squatted on lava grass. Sullen men, apart and unfriendly for reasons not always obscure. They remembered the flinty trading by which Challon and Hank Bayard had finally forged a chain of leases from the old XO to the flatlands beyond the lava. Here in this badlands link lay the weakness in the XO structure by which Challon intended Marcy and Anson Prentice should meet their first defeat.

He sent a horse to the Uncle Dick Bar early in the morning. 'Lena Casamajor came down Goat Hill to meet him in the willows on the edge of town. With the sun in their faces they rode toward the lava, the volcano and the blue spire of Tinaja two silhouettes a dozen miles apart on the eastern horizon.

Challon did not know the girl beside him, only her usefulness. Jim Pozner was the leader of the lava men. A thin, quiet man, hard and arrogant, with a strange streak of righteousness. Unpredictable, personally dangerous, and probably the most bitter enemy the XO had made in a good many years of trading friendliness and enmity alike for more land. If 'Lena Casamajor could make Pozner listen and even partially understand the changes afoot with the passing of the XO from Challon hands, she would have done much for Marc. But he could not easily explain her willingness to help. She would know the risk Jim Pozner and the others took even in meeting a Chal-

lon. The old days were not forgotten and men did not change that much.

There was but one apparent explanation for the girl. Personal vanity was a Challon heritage and the strong awareness of the physical which this country bred into its people was marked in him. Perigord had said this girl had kept apart from the errors of other *paisano* women on the grass. Perhaps she had at last found the kind of man for which she had long looked, and the idea amused him grimly. Challon felt no longer so much a man as an engine of destruction. He waited out more than an hour of their eastward ride for the girl to speak.

Topping the long rise of the watershed, they stopped to breathe their horses. The country lay in prismatic brilliance about them. In the lee of the big mesas to the north the home buildings of the XO stood out clearly. Belle Challon's big house, the gambrel-roofed barn. Equipment sheds, the store, bunkhouses, bungalows for married employees. Cottonwoods up the slope shading the little log-and-'dobe cabin where Pierre Challon at fifty had brought a bride from the River. The lot of it framed by the line of white posts supporting the taut fencing parceling off the sixteen-section-square of the home place. Elena Casamajor looked northward a long time.

"Why did you let her have it?" she asked. "You love her that much, still—that woman?"

Challon wondered if he had ever really loved Marcy. Had it been the spark of conflict, the challenge, the winning and losing, even in small things? Had it ever been love?

"You've watched poker, 'Lena," he said slowly. "A shrewd dealer often throws away a good pot in the beginning to draw out bigger stakes later in the game."

The girl looked north again. "It's worth fighting for," she said. "Not because it'll make the man who owns it rich. Not even because it belongs to you, really. Because it doesn't. Really it belongs to the country."

Challon didn't understand this and said so. The girl frowned.

"How many tables in Red River County are fed with what grows on the XO? Not just the beef. There's more to it than that, Marc Challon. The stage line, the saloons and their Saturday XO trade, even down to the extra hands hired at roundup. Whatever you do out here now, Marc, the whole county will watch."

Challon was amused at this reflection of his own pride in ownership of the XO appearing in this girl. She saw his smile.

"You think I joke. If you do what you're trying to do, you'll have to understand. You know the Clifton House?"

Challon nodded, recalling a roofless, windowless stand of mud walls and an askew array of breached corrals on the banks of the Canadian.

"I heard of it often when I was small," the girl said. "A busy hotel then. Stopping-place on the Old Trail. Part of New Mexico. Now it's a ruin. I cried when I saw it last fall. It'll soon be forgotten. And the Maxwell house at Cimarron, a palace when the old *Señor* built it—when he owned three million, five million acres. And Carson, the little *yanqui* who really showed the way to Santa Fe—forgotten already in a sunken grave behind Taos! You want to know why I ride with you? This is part of it! Something has to be left under the mesas to mark

the big things that have been here. There's been so much more than just empty grass in New Mexico. Springer's, Chico, the Challon ranch—something has to be saved!"

Challon said nothing. He was stirred, but Marcy had left him with a distrust of feminine motive. And it was usual that all dead things were carrion on the grass.

"There's a saying among my people that the devil's in a man who wants revenge," 'Lena added after a moment.

"Then the devil's in me," Challon told her. He gigged his mount forward.

They halted again two miles from Tinaja Springs where weeded ruts led off toward the Pozner place.

"Tia will see that Jim comes down to your camp tonight," 'Lena said. "The Hyatts and some of the others may be with him. They won't trust you; expect that. They won't listen to dickering."

"Get them down. I'll handle them."

The girl nodded and reined away. Challon followed the trail on into the springs. A rider spotted him and signaled camp with his hat. A brush corral was up there, a pole-and-brush cooking-shelter, a fire-circle, and beds were on the ground. Challon's hundred-head exception from the XO herds was bunched near by. The crew was waiting. These were his tools. He felt eagerness.

To cattlemen in the tradition of Charlie Goodnight and John Chisum, he was an experimenter and maybe a fool. This was longhorn country. But these whitefaces were Marc Challon's real contribution to the XO—his vision the heavy animals on New Mexico grass, his gamble they would thrive, his belief that when there were commercial herds there would also be an available market. The rails were a part of it. Whitefaces could not stand the long drives by which Texans moved their longhorns to shipping-pens along Kansas railroads, but chutes on the Santa Fe at Range would be in the XO's back yard. Marcy had stepped into the path of something bigger than any woman.

Bayard hailed Challon from the camp duffel pile. "Stop by the ranch?"

Challon shook his head.

"You should have," Hank said. "This isn't turning out to be the best idea you ever had!"

"Why?"

"Prentice is coppering his bets. Got a new crew already. Pete Maxwell must have hired some for him down to Fort Sumner. Some of Billy Bonney's bunch, I think. Culled the rest around Las Vegas and Mora. Cy Van Cleave's got my old job."

Challon whistled. This wasn't Prentice. This was Marcy. She'd heard talk of Bill Bonney. Kid Antrim—Kid Bonney—Billy the Kid. And Van Cleave, the rattlesnake of Mora. Marcy was not afraid of the Challons, nor would this man be. Wary, but not afraid.

"I don't like it, Hank," he said.

"I'm singing hallelujahs!" Hank growled. "What do you do, now?"

"The same thing. Nothing's changed. Break Prentice."

"And his old man and the Santa Fe! Pozner and the Hyatts and Van Cleave. Talk about the hard way, Marc! You could have hung onto the ranch without handing it to Prentice and then squaring away to take it from him again!"

"Maybe," Challon agreed. "But it would have been a tight squeeze and Marcy would have poured mud into

everybody's pocket before she was through. You don't know her, Hank. Besides, you're forgetting something. There's a dam I want to build on Torrentado. It'll cost a lot of money. Money I'd as soon came out of somebody else's pocket. I've got an account fat with Prentice cash, now. If I was to get the ranch back, too—"

Hank Bayard grinned. "You play awful dirty, Marc! Fair enough. Prentice asked for it. And then there's Marcy—"

"Yes—" Challon nodded. "And then there's Marcy."

Chapter Four

The Lava Men

MARC sensed something familiar in the wariness and injured pride of the lava men as they rode into Tinaja two hours after dark. Twenty years before there had still been Utes on the mesas. To keep truce with them, the XO had held its own Beef Ration Day once each quarter, killing all the meat the Utes could carry away with them. The Indians had ridden in as these men did, dark and silent and almost to the fire before they halted. Challon recognized Pozner, Simi and Ed Hyatt, and Frank Germaine. The others were lost in the anonymity of the shadows.

Elena, among them, crossed at a little half-run to Challon. Her arm slid around him and she turned, pressed in under his arm, to face her uncle. A woman, secure under the touch of her man. Bayard's eyes fastened accusingly on Challon. The girl spoke swiftly, her lips barely moving.

"I had to lie before Tia would lie for me. I told her you'd taken me. That gave me the right to come to her for help. Don't talk about your poker game for the XO. Talk about hate, Marc. These people understand hate."

"'Evening, Jim," Challon said to Pozner. "'Light down. There's some whisky in my saddlebags, Hank. Break it out."

Pozner dismounted, followed by his companions. They passed the fire to face Challon across a yard of space. Pozner's dispassionate eyes were dead. They touched Elena.

"Going to marry her, Challon?"

"Got one wife too many now, Jim," Challon said carefully.

Pozner shrugged. "Doesn't mean a damned thing to me. Her aunt wanted to know. I said I'd find out."

"The hell with the girl, Jim!" Simi Hyatt interrupted harshly. "We want to know why Challon's camped here. His women's his business but we don't like the XO out here. He better have a reason."

Challon shot a hard glance at the elder Hyatt. "Maybe the same one you and Ed have got for holing up out here. I've got a chore the law won't let me handle my own way if I'm inside a fence."

"The hell! The Challons can do anything in this county. They always have. They're the XO!"

"Not any more, Simi. You boys been holding XO scalp dances out here for years. Now I want some of the same top-hair."

"Us string with you against Cy Van Cleave and a bunch from Lincoln County—on your mad?" Simi Hyatt protested. "Our teeth ain't long enough!"

"Wasn't it Ed, here, who took a pair

of guns off Billy Antrim in Mesilla last winter and then broke his nose with his fist?" Challon asked.

Ed Hyatt grinned. Frank Germaine spat and spoke slowly. "You're right in one thing, Challon. Not all the good men come from Lincoln County."

Elena stirred in Challon's arms, encouragingly. Challon looked at Pozner.

"I'm off the XO—finished with it—understand? I helped build it; now it suits me to pull it down some. Pierre's gone to Denver and I need help."

"Maybe you ain't lying," Pozner conceded. "Never thought I'd ever see Pierre Challon whipped off his ranch. What you want?"

"We never put the XO leases through here in writing. I want them switched to me, personally, now. That'll cut the home ranch off from the east grass. I'll keep the XO crew off the leased sections. I want you boys to keep them out of the rest of the lava."

"It'll cost you twice what you paid for those leases when you were the XO," Pozner warned.

"I'll pay."

"Reckon you've made a deal, then, Challon. What about XO beef?"

"That's Van Cleave's worry."

Pozner grinned. "And the whitefaces you've got here?"

"They're my guarantee we're on the same side of the fence. Keep your eyes on them till I've plowed the furrow I want across the XO. They're my show stock, my one chance of getting started again. Ought to be enough to convince you."

"All right," Pozner agreed. "Deal clean and we'll leave 'em be."

"Hugh Perigord's apt to come prowling this way if it gets so he can see smoke in town," Challon warned.

"Hugh ought to know better!" Pozner said thinly. "He's never had any business on the lava past the XO. He's got none, now." Pozner studied Challon a long moment. "Tia's going to feel a lot better about 'Lena when I tell her about this. Takes hate for a man to tear down what he's built, for a woman. Man's got to love to hate. Maybe you can keep 'Lena happy. You better try."

Challon said nothing. Pozner spat. "I'll send Simi and Ed to Van Cleave with news those leases are canceled. Fat'll be in the fire, then. You and your boys better do your part. The middle's a poor place to be caught!"

The man nodded abruptly to his companions. They mounted and rode off together, taking two bottles of Challon's whisky with them. Challon turned 'Lena Casamajor to face him.

"Must have been some lie you told Tia Pozner! Jim swallowed it whole."

"About your taking me?" she asked calmly. "It wasn't hard for them to believe, Marc. They know that since the first time I saw you on the streets of Range, years ago, I've wanted you."

Challon stared. She smiled. "Where will I sleep tonight?" she asked.

"Sleep?" The word was jolted from Challon.

"You want them to know I was lying?" the girl asked with rounded eyes. "You want them to think you can't even keep a woman through the first night? Things are different on the lava than they are in town, Marc—different than they were on the XO. Much different."

She turned away with an oblique backward glance. With ridiculous relief Challon watched her pull a roll of bedding from the cantle of her saddle and disappear into the cooking-shelter. Hank Bayard nudged his elbow, his

eyes alive.

"Man!" Hank breathed. "Man!" He was laughing.

The girl's voice drifted out of the shelter. He thought she was laughing, too. "*Que duerma bien*, Marc—"

Challon crossed to his saddle, spilled his bedroll down at Bayard's feet, and kicked it flat. Hank was still chuckling. Challon kicked the bedroll again.

"Hell!" he said. It was inadequate.

Chapter Five

The First of the Dead Men

THE Hyatt brothers stopped at Tinaja, returning from the XO. 'Lena poured more water into the stew she had on the fire. Challon had been out afoot among the whitefaces, removing himself from the camp and the girl, his mind searching for her motives in the relationship she had thrust on him the night before. Seeing the Hyatts, he came in, arriving as they dismounted.

This scene, also, had a disturbingly reminiscent air. The stock, without fencing to hold it. Unshaven, armed men swinging thighs high as they quit leather to clear the butts of rifles sheathed beneath saddle skirts. Expectancy in Bayard and his own boys and himself. All of it like something out of his father's book, not his own.

"Prentice accept the cancellations?" he asked Simi Hyatt.

"Van Cleave did the talking, with your wife backing him. First time I ever seen her, Challon. Now I know you're crazy for walking off the XO!" He glanced at 'Lena. "Maybe thunder and lightning when they're young, but they run to fat and lip whiskers, directly. Like mine with white skin!"

"Stick to business," Challon snapped. "The XO understands it's got to stay off the leases, now?"

"Jim never told us to say that. They're smart enough to guess it."

'Lena beat on the stew kettle. They all filed in for a spoon and a laden mug and waited for the mugs to cool. Ed Hyatt watched 'Lena at the big kettle, his mouth open and his eyes half-lidded. He started, almost with guilt, when Challon stirred impatiently.

"You do all right," he said. "About Van Cleave, he wanted leave to bunch the XO stuff out east and move it home."

"You said he could?"

"Only that he could try."

"You should have warned him not to, Simi," Challon said. "The XO's cut in two. The sooner they know I'm making that stick, the better for us all."

Simi grinned, tipped his mug up, and drained it. He handed the mug to Challon.

"Thanks for the chow," he said. "Good luck, Challon. Come on, Ed."

They crossed to their horses. Challon watched them go with tight lips. Simi Hyatt was only a little less obvious than Hank Bayard. Challon knew he had gotten a carefully screened report of the talk at the XO. He signaled his foreman.

"Move the whitefaces out onto the leases soon as chow's finished, Hank. String them clear across, the boys with them. Warn any XO men that start across. Warn them, don't try to stop them. And let me know, fast. I'll be here."

Hank looked uncomfortable. "Remember what Pozner said last night about being in the middle? You sure

that ain't exactly where we are, now?"

Challon shook his head. Bayard moved off among the men hunkered in the shade of the cooking-shelter with their cigarettes. Hank's back was ramrod-straight when they presently rode in a body out of camp.

For a roof over his head and an iron for which to ride, a saddle hand turned out his judgment as well as his skill and loyalty. Opinion was his right, along with expression of it. Bayard would not play this hand this way and was angry because of it. Hank was bullheaded—within an ace of being too bullheaded to work for a Challon—and the springs of his anger were as quick and engulfing as the springs of his loyalty. His hostility troubled Challon. Under the circumstances his disapproval had a weight out of all proportion to its importance.

'Lena finished at the fire presently. "Good chow," Challon told her. "Makes a difference with the boys. I better put you on the pay roll."

'Lena was watching the departing riders. She shook her head.

"It's all I can do," Challon added firmly. "You've got to understand that."

"Worried about last night?" she asked. Challon made no answer. She turned suddenly to him. "How many men were killed, building the XO, Marc?"

Challon accepted both the change of subject and the unanswerable question. Hugh Perigord knew part of the count, Pierre perhaps all of it. It was useless knowledge. Men died in anything. Circumstances and motives were forgotten. Viewpoint changed. There was no longer chance of assessing the justice involved. Recollection was pointless.

"A few," he said.

"Are you as cautious in everything as you are with me?" 'Lena asked accusingly. "Like a child who's burned his hands on a stove. Can't you tell which ones have fire in them yet?"

Marcy was troubling this girl a great deal. Challon looked at her and forgot Marcy. Fire, she said. He shook his head slowly.

"No."

She smiled, reverted to her frown. "The dead men—a few, I know that! How many doesn't make any difference, I suppose—just why they were killed. I don't suppose your father ever really hated a man. Men big enough to earn Pierre Challon's hatred must have been scarce, even in the old days. Maybe Hank Bayard has never hated, either. It was just that somebody was in the way of the ranch. He wouldn't move. That made him wrong. He was removed. It doesn't seem so terrible."

"You driving at something?"

"Yes. The ranch is built, now. Nothing's in its way but a woman. Why should she be handled differently than the others?"

"Maybe there's a hating Challon, now."

"Men are going to die because of that woman, Marc. Maybe a lot of them. Maybe your father—maybe Marc Challon, himself—"

"You're trying to tell me to be careful?"

"Yes, Marc!"

'Lena stood up. Challon rose with her. The sun was hot. Dust was in the air, the faint sweetening of sage and crushed grass. The smell of cattle and their droppings. Sweat dampened Challon's shirt and sweat made tiny ringlets along the girl's hairline. The smells and the sweat and the heat were good.

This was the grass country—this was New Mexico.

Challon reached out and gripped 'Lena's shoulders, pulling her toward him. He expected an eager, laughing light in her eyes but there was only her frown. She slid out of his grasp with a deftness as old and instinctive as provocation, itself.

Challon flushed in the sun. 'Lena started down to the corral. Challon picked up her saddle and followed. She slipped a hackamore onto the startled pinto she had ridden down from Pozner's. Challon swung her saddle up and she cinched it to her own satisfaction, mounting then, her skirt riding at her knees. Challon placed his hand on one of these. She reined the pony away.

"I'm going up to see Tia," she said.

"You're afraid," Challon told her.

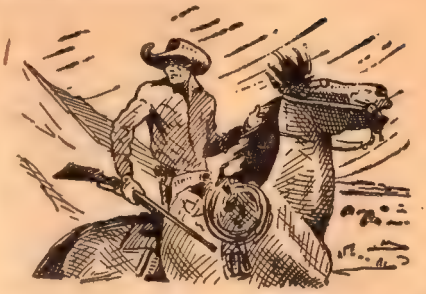
"Yes. But not of you, Marc."

"Pozner or the Hyatts, then?" It was an echo of his own thoughts. Her face darkened with half-anger.

"You're a fool!" she breathed. She wheeled away and was gone beyond earshot before Challon realized her fear had been of herself here in the sun. He restrained an impulse to ride after her. He had ridden after Marcy to bring her home a bride. Once was enough.

Alone in the Tinaja camp, Challon struggled against restlessness and the corrosion of doubt. He knew its roots. Motionlessness was as dangerous to him as it had been to his father. They were a moving kind, needing wind in their faces.

It was with relief Challon saw a rider beating in from the north with a recklessness which forewarned unpleasant news. He recognized the East-



man kid and waited impatiently. The kid pulled his blown horse to a plunging halt and slid to the ground. Challon saw a bullet burn on the animal's rump and the chalky whiteness of the kid's face. Buddy Eastman trotted unsteadily to him and gripped his arms.

"Van Cleave!" he choked. His eyes rolled a little, frightened.

Challon saw his nausea rise. He tried to step aside but the kid clung to him and retched miserably. Fouled by the product of the boy's fear, Challon's patience snapped. He jerked the kid straight by his collar.

"If you've got something to say, spit it out!" he demanded. His free hand wiped smartly across the white face in an attempt to jar the youngster into coherence. Livid finger marks jumped up in contrast to the pallor. The boy's eyes steadied. His slack lips stiffened as startled, half-hurt anger braced him.

"Van Cleave went through with a bunch," he said with an effort at clarity. "No chance to warn him off—didn't give me no warning—"

His throat choked up again. His body came rigidly up on toes, tilting in terrible appeal against Challon for a moment. Then he collapsed, buckling so suddenly Challon lost his grip on his jacket and he hit the ground hard.

Marc knelt beside him. The tail of

the jacket had slid up, exposing the boy's white belly and a great tear to one side of his navel. Challon had knocked a grizzly bear down with a smaller belly wound than this. And he had thought fear choked the boy's speech!

Squatting on his heels in the dust, Challon chewed on harsh self-condemnation. The boy was dead. He turned the body over to confirm what he already knew. Buddy Eastman had been riding away, not fighting, when the rifle bullet struck him. Here was the first of 'Lena's dead men.

Wrapping the body in a blanket from his own roll, Challon put it under the cooking-shelter and caught up a horse. He wondered how Hank and the others had fared, out on the leases, but he rode quarteringly northward, bearing away from them. His business was with Van Cleave, now.

Initiative here was of tremendous value. In cutting the XO in two, he had attempted to seize it, hoping to wind the pressure swiftly tighter until Marcy and Anson Prentice broke under it. Van Cleave had checkmated him, striking the first blow. If the new XO foreman could now snowball a show of strength and inflexibility beyond the point of resistance, his employers would be secure. There was a limit to loyalty and the hatred and bitterness of the lava people. There was a limit to what a man could buy.

And Challon knew better than most how little a man could accomplish in this country alone. In spite of the roughness of individuality the grass stamped on most of those who rode across it, the history of the country had been one of close co-operation. Van Cleave had to be choked down before he was too far out in front.

Chapter Six

Challon Vanity

A QUARTER of an hour from Tinaja, Challon emerged on high ground. Dust below answered his questions. In near distance a big herd of XO cattle was being driven northward toward a pass through the mesas to the no-man's-land of The Strip. He needed no glass to identify the drovers, remembering Simi Hyatt's grin when he said he had told Cy Van Cleave the XO could *try* to move stock east of the lava back to the home-ranch sections.

This was a long frustrated ambition of the lava men. The Challons were out of the way and once into The Strip this herd would be as effectively out of the XO's reach as if it had been driven the length of the Territory to a Mexican haven. There was grass in The Strip, no law, and unquestioning buyers.

Scowling, Challon studied the sweep of the country. It took him minutes to discover Van Cleave's party. It was working along the distant base of the mesas, hidden from the drovers with the herd and heading for a notch among the canyons to the east through which the cattle would have to pass to reach The Strip. A notch fashioned by nature for ambush.

Challon slanted back onto the flats and dropped into a dry barranca which gave him good bottom for fast riding and cover from chance discovery by either party ahead of him. He rode hard, swinging the volcano around to the west of him and driving straight for Boundary Mesa. Climbing a small

blind canyon, he took a ridge to a higher crevice. At the end of half an hour he was up under the broken crown of the mesa, a hundred yards above the trail leading into The Strip and opposite the point he judged Van Cleave would choose for his trap.

Instinctive timing, bred of knowledge of the country and the purposes of both parties with him on the mesa, was nearly perfect. Challon was barely into position with his rifle when a tiny, tell-tale slide spilled down the opposite wall of the cut above which he crouched. Van Cleave, coming into position.

Minutes later, dust began to sift up from the trail below. The point of the driven herd passed beneath Challon. The drovers were cautious. Knowing stock could not stray in this defile, the men were all bunched in the dust behind the cattle, where cover was best. Retreat was open behind them. In any event, the cattle would be past the point of danger before they could be forced into a stand.

The tail of the drive appeared. Challon levered a shell into the chamber of his rifle. He sifted both of the Hyatts and Frank Germaine from the dust. He didn't know the others, nor could he locate Pozner. He was looking for the man when the XO outfit broke cover on the opposite rim and rode recklessly down a grassed slide. Their rifles remained booted. They were counting on close work. Cy Van Cleave was in the lead.

Challon studied the vest on Marcy's foreman in the notch of his sights but vanity made him shift his target to the man next to Van Cleave after a moment. The Rattlesnake of Mora had stature on the grass and the grass country would expect more of a Challon than a careful rifle shot from cover for such a man. Legend lived on the grass and was dear to it. Tradition made the enmities of certain men public property and set the patterns by which they could be solved.

Van Cleave's belt gun banged at one of the lava men when Challon's finger was tight against the trigger of his rifle. Challon's weapon seemed to fire in automatic response to Van Cleave's shot. The man in Challon's sights swung both hands high as though reaching for his hat and went out of his saddle.

Challon moved to another target as Van Cleave pulled abruptly up, eyes reaching up to the powdersmoke drifting above Challon's position. Marc saw the mark of his second shot on a white shirt a little behind Van Cleave. The XO foreman shouted a command and the ranch crew swung frantically down the cut, lying low in leather. Challon lowered the rifle. This was enough, for now.

The Hyatts and the others from the lava, startled by this assistance from the rim, had broken for a side canyon stretching off into the thickest of the lava *malpais* near the volcano cone. Van Cleave and his men picked a wider angle of retreat, holding more to open country.

Trotting up the rim a few yards, Challon knelt at a place from which he could cover the head of the desultorily moving cattle. This was, in the last analysis, Challon beef. He would have let the Hyatts drive it into The Strip to harry Marcy and Anson Prentice. But the Hyatts had hit the brush and there were other matters to harry Anson and Marcy, now. There was no point in losing the cattle.

He dropped three steers in the lead

before there was enough blood on the sand to spook the others and turn them back. He glanced at the fallen men below, his lips tightening. They were Van Cleave's problem; let Van Cleave care for them. Picking up their wounded or dead might delay the return of the ranch crew to the XO. Challon wanted this. He had dealt with Van Cleave for Buddy Eastman, but there was still Marcy. He returned to his horse.

Anson Prentice was sprawled in one of the deep seats on the *ramada*, fronting the XO house. Challon dismounted at the head of the footpath leading across the small, thick lawn to the house. He thought Prentice was asleep. An indication of the man's real interest in the country and the ranch. He had once tried to tell Prentice of the freedom of spirit the grass afforded those who could grasp it. An effort to explain his own position, his desire to keep on building the XO in spite of the bulk the ranch had already achieved. It had been useless.

Anse had been cast in too narrow a mold and his metal had cooled to a brittleness beyond change. Bulk he understood. Wealth on the hoof. Power. Nothing else. The grass was novelty. Maybe even Marcy was novelty, a bright and wicked current to ruffle the placidity of Anse's life. Exciting, as the taking of another man's wife was exciting. A hollow and somehow ridiculous echo of a daring Anse did not actually possess.

When Challon came in under the *ramada*, Prentice started violently, so he had not been asleep. He eyed Challon apprehensively for a moment, then stiffened and stood up. He opened his mouth to speak but Challon spoke first.

"Where's Marcy?"

"She can wait, Marc. What the hell are you doing here?"

"Since when has Marcy learned to wait? Where is she?"

"Marc, I want to talk to you."

"What good would it do?"

Prentice flushed. "I was afraid you'd gotten the wrong slant on this from the beginning, Marc. Marcy didn't run you—or the XO—when you were on it. She isn't running me. If you've got business here, I'll hear it."

"I'll buy you out when you've had enough of what you asked for when you started this, Anse. But that's all the business we're ever going to do!"

Prentice lost color but he smiled a little, unpleasantly.

"You're awfully damned sure, Marc. Let me tell you something. My father and some of the other Santa Fe directors are at Trinidad on an inspection tour. A rider brought a message over to me this afternoon. I'm supposed to build a fire under Perigord, in town. The pay train for the grading crews at the foot of the pass was held up last night. They almost caught the bunch that did it. They had come a long way. They were on blown horses. And they made off down this side of the mesa."

Challon considered this. The lava bunch had been in his camp at Tinaja early in the evening. Only their battered gods knew where they had gone when they left. This was something they would like. The railroad meant an end to the solitude of the grass and of the *malpais* and it was the work of the rich and the powerful, to whom they were opposed. A hurt to the railroad would give them satisfaction and pay-train money spent easily. Still, he didn't think it was lava work.

"Did you look in your own corral to see if any of those Lincoln County horses had been on a hard ride last night? Or could you tell if you looked, Anse? Those new boys of yours would feel more comfortable behind masks than they do in their own whiskers!"

"You forced those men onto us, Marc. You took our crew and cut the XO in two. Van Cleave and the others seemed the only answer we could give you."

"And Marcy set it up for you!" Challon said flatly. Prentice set his jaw stubbornly.

"We won't bluff and we won't scare, Marc. Don't try to drag the railroad into this. You'll have your hands full with the XO. Marcy wants it and like I told you, I'm going to see she has it. I'll be honest with you; I'd rather have Hank Bayard bossing the boys in the bunkhouse than Cy Van Cleave. I don't want this to go any farther. Maybe you were trimmed too close for what you had here. How about that breeding stock you've got left? Van Cleave says the strain here won't amount to much without it. I'll try to make it fair. Suppose I pay you fifteen hundred dollars a head for the hundred animals you kept? That's about stock-show price, I think. And those you kept weren't all show stuff. I could raise enough more cash to about do that. Would you quit New Mexico for another hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Marc?"

"Let's understand each other right down to the ground," Challon said quietly. "I wouldn't quit now for your father's share in the Santa Fe or ten gallons of your blood, delivered to me in a barrel! I told you, we're not ready to talk business—yet. You're going to be on your belly. You're not going to be able to raise a nickel. Maybe there won't even be any rails across the pass. You'll hate Marcy as much as I hate her and maybe she'll know what a sheet of tin you are. When we're to that place, all of us, we'll talk about quitting New Mexico. But it won't be me who's leaving!"

"It's going to get nasty, I'm afraid, Marc!" Prentice said stiffly.

"You guessing? I hope you're on a horse you can ride!"

Challon moved down the *ramada* toward the sunken main door of the house. Prentice followed him and touched his arm at the doorway.

"All right, Marc," he said. "We understand each other. This is something else. I don't meet many people down here. Hard for me to talk to those I do. And I want to keep this between ourselves. That's why I'm asking you. That and the fact I know I'll get an honest answer. Marcy doesn't talk much. But some of the riders do—the new ones. Look, Marc, did you meet Marcy in Kansas City at a—at a—?"

Prentice broke off uneasily. Challon stared at him. He felt a surge of scorn. A man might be forgiven the pressures put on him by desire for a woman. He might be forgiven a lack of understanding of values on the grass. But not narrowness of soul.

"At a pleasure house?" he asked grimly. "No, Anse. Your rider's got the story wrong. Not Marcy. She came from Indiana, I think. I found her in Trinidad, teaching school and waiting for a chance to marry the XO. The woman from Kansas City was something Marcy could never be. She was honest. She married an old man and gave him love and a home and happiness. She gave him faith. She gave him a son. She was my mother."

Prentice swallowed hard. His hand dropped to Challon's sleeve.

"Oh! I didn't know. Marc, I'm sorry—"

"Sorry!" Challon snapped, very close to flooding anger. "You damned fool, that's one of the things I'm proud of! Get out of my way. I'll find Marcy myself."

Chapter Seven

"Start Digging Graves!"

CHALLON strode rapidly through the cool, dark rooms of the XO house, holding off their familiarity with a strong physical effort. Marcy's door was ajar. He pushed it open without knocking. She was lazing in a wrapper on the huge bed, knees bent and feet in the air. She glanced unhurriedly around and Challon felt a flash of his first anger that she might now expect Prentice, but not himself. Her eyes clouded for a moment with instinctive alarm, then cleared.

"You might have knocked, Marc," she murmured without reproach. She smiled and reached a paper from the lamp stand for him. "Take a look at this. Art Treadwell can move fast when he's got real money to work with!"

Challon saw the document was a legal filing in the Territorial court at Santa Fe, *Challon versus Challon.* "Art's a good man," he said.

"I'm disappointed, Marc. I thought you'd bleed a little, seeing that. Your iron-man legend is all right out on the range, but it won't hold together in this house—this room—with me!"

Challon felt the barb, probing for memories which began with this woman. The first weeks, the plans, all of the first five years. The exultation in Pierre and in himself that Marcy understood the Challons and the forging of their dreams. Perfection—and now this. Marcy, shrewdly watching him, laughed.

"You think the rules are off, now, Marc. You think you'll get the ranch back and money for your irrigation system besides. But you can't."

"No? I just saw Anse. He's sweating, already. Asked me where you came from in the beginning. He had a funny idea where it might have been—maybe not too wrong, at that. He's beginning to realize he isn't playing with somebody else's chips any more, that he's supposed to marry you. A kind of permanent thing. He's got to take you East to meet his family and his friends, sooner or later, and I don't think he's happy."

"Couldn't tell him much, could you, Marc?"

"About where you came from? Only the truth, far as I know it. Could have sent him to Trinidad to back-track you from there, but what would be the difference? Roots don't make a person. Mostly it's what's inside of them. I want Anse to discover the rot in you himself."

"Anson won't discover anything! You didn't and Anson isn't Marc Challon, for what that's worth to your vanity. I'm not worried about his family and his friends. I'm bringing Anson a hundred thousand acres. That's big, Marc, even in Chicago. He won't have any trouble when he takes me home."

"If he does," Challon murmured.

Anger flared in Marcy. "You didn't get homesick, Marc. Why are you here?"

"Making trouble, for one thing, I hope. Mostly to tell you your boys are playing a little rough. They shot Buddy Eastman in the back today."

"What do you expect?" Marcy asked harshly. "They've got their orders to stop you, Marc. I'll fire every man, including Van Cleave, the day you leave New Mexico."

"If you won't fire them now, you'll have to start burying them," Challon said. "Better start a crew digging graves in the morning. I filled a couple for you this afternoon and I won't stop. You asked for this. When you've had enough, I'll still be camped at Tinaja."

Marcy's voice was soft, with pleasantness of tone, but there was an obscene ugliness to her profanity. Challon stepped into the hall and pulled the door to her room closed behind him.

Prentice was not in sight outside. Night was crowding down, heavy and clinging and silent. Challon thought Van Cleave had now had more than enough time to pick up his dead under the mesa and return to the ranch. The continued absence of Marcy's crew troubled him. The XO was too quiet. A sharp letdown from Marcy's parting vitriol.

He mounted and headed his horse at a walk for the front gate. A rider came along the lane from the opposite direction. Challon reined aside and as the man passed he was jolted by hard-hitting recognition and shock. The man was one of the two XO hands Challon had knocked from saddle in the cut far up the mesa. His shirt was bloody and he rode by a dazed fixation of will.

Marc Challon had held his sights a little too high in the afternoon sun, but the bite was not in this mischance of marksmanship. This man was coming in alone, unattended. Van Cleave and the rest had not circled back to the ambush to pick up their casualties. They had ridden elsewhere and their present whereabouts was a dark and imperative question in Challon's mind. He lifted his horse into a full run toward Tinaja before the sound of the man's passing had died.

Hugh Perigord was squatting beside the night fire at Tinaja. As he swung down from his winded horse Challon saw only one of his own men was missing. One of the boys was taking Buddy Eastman's body home and Marc Challon would be a bitterly hated man on one homestead tonight. Marc felt again the taste of self-condemnation for the boy's death, but it was overridden by relief that Van Cleave had not jumped this fire. He moved toward the light.

Playing a face-down hand, Bayard had done what he could with Perigord, getting the man drunk while he waited and fairly well lighting up the whole crew in the process. It wasn't good. Challon needed Hank's blunt directness and a crew which could ride, tonight. Perigord rose to his feet as Challon approached, his triangular head thrust aggressively forward.

"Want to talk to you, Marc—"

"Not now."

Perigord pulled up. He'd come out of the worst of the Kansas rail towns. He knew the patterns of the great—Hickok, Masterson, and the rest—and their showmanship occasionally surfaced in him as now. His weight went into nice balance on the balls of his feet, his body slanted a little forward. His arms hung relaxed, elbows out at

a slightly exaggerated angle. Firelight drew hawk's shadows along his sharp features and turned the whites of his eyes to a truculent ruddiness. He had been a man beside a fire; now he was a man with authority—and a gun. Game-cock posturing which would have been ludicrous if it had not also been deadly.

"Now, Marc!" he snapped.

Challon knew the man too well for underestimation. The XO had elected every county officer since organization of the Territory and Pierre had sent a long way for Perigord. He had been the right man to keep order in Red River County. He didn't bluff. He wasn't bluffing, now. Marc Challon was no longer a huge ranch and a bloc of votes. He was merely a man with whom Perigord wished to talk.

But Challon had no time. He started past Perigord. The man snagged his shoulder in a harshly arresting gesture. Challon broke the grip. Bayard grunted a quick exclamation of warning. Perigord's hand snapped closed on the grips of his loosely holstered gun.

What occurred was instinctive, something Pierre had learned of necessity and which had become part of the physical heritage Challon had from him. An involuntary, unconsidered movement, far more swift and finely calculated than any consciously directed one could have been. Challon's forward stride became a pivot with whiplash acceleration. With all the instinctive precision of his body behind the blow, he drove his right fist into Perigord's belly two inches above his belt.

The impact made a soft, ugly sound. Perigord belched air and jackknifed onto his head and face, neck rolling as he spilled over onto his side. He lay conscious and in agony, eyes mirroring simultaneous bewilderment and anger.

Challon pinned the wrist of his gun hand down with one boot and kicked the sheriff's drawn weapon clear with the other. Hank Bayard lifted the weapon, punched the loads from its cylinder, and tossed it back down beside the fallen man.

Perigord rolled onto his back and pushed his knees high. The griping paralysis of Challon's blow eased. The sheriff pulled air into his lungs and climbed unsteadily to his feet. He dusted himself clumsily and holstered his empty gun. His face was gray with shock and he tried twice before he could speak.

"Talking would have been easier, Marc!"

He turned and walked unsteadily around the corner of the cooking-shelter. A moment later he reappeared beyond it, up in saddle and riding out. Hank Bayard took off his hat and parted his thin hair with his fingers.

"Some day you're going to kill a man with that hand of yours, Marc! Words are cheap. I'd have spent a few to keep Hugh off of our backs. Why didn't you give him his say? He's been waiting since sundown."

"I told him—no time. Don't let Hugh spook you, Hank. If he comes back, he'll have to come alone. He'd never raise a posse in Range to ride after a Challon and he knows it. Seen anything of 'Lena since you came in?" Hank shook his head. "—Or the XO bunch?"

"Just their tracks on the leases. What's up?"

"Trouble—at Pozner's, I think. And I'm afraid we're going to be too late. That's why I didn't have time for Hugh."

"Too late? Then why go? Enough

fire on your tail, now, Marc. The railroad gave Hugh a charge of buckshot in his backside today. A pay train was cleaned of eight thousand dollars in the pass. One of the bunch was wounded and they all headed to this side of the pass. That's what Hugh wanted to ask you about."

"Why me?"

"Why not? He knows the boys he wants came from the lava or The Strip. Prentice's old man is a director on the road. Everybody knows Prentice stole your keys—that you're sore at Prentice and your wife and have quit your ranch. And you been talking to Jim Pozner. One of your boys died of gunshot wounds today. Why shouldn't Hugh figure you were a good place to start asking questions?"

"Because he knows me. If I was after the Santa Fe I'd take the works—rails, roadbed, and right of way—not just a pay roll!"

"Hugh'll get his posse, Marc. You've forgot the ringy bunch Prentice has got on the XO."

"The hell I have, Hank! Get the boys up. We'll take a crack at settling that, too!"

Chapter Eight

Tia Pozner's Courage

CHALLON took the ridges with his men, trading the easier going of the lower trail for time. He didn't know what to expect to find at Pozner's, certainly not the quiet surrounding the lava homestead when they slanted down the low slope behind it. Horses were in the corral, the yard apparently orderly, and a lamp was lit in the little stone and piñon-log house.

He swore at Van Cleave. His estimation of the man either fell short or overshot. Van Cleave should have been here. He wondered if Marcy was shrewdly playing on her knowledge of Challon nature and giving Van Cleave orders she knew would pull her former husband up short. He discarded the thought as it was born. With the devil's due, Marcy was not this much a perfectionist. This was chance—Van Cleave weaving his own pattern within the loom Marcy provided.

Bayard discovered the first sign of trouble. Pozner's dog lay in the yard, dead of a bullet fired at close range. Challon swung swiftly down and pushed open Pozner's door. The embers of a fire glowed in the fireplace within. Frank Germaine was sprawled on the floor so close to the hearth that the sole of one boot was blackened and curled away from the upper, revealing a scorched sock and swollen foot. Germaine's gun lay near him. He was dead.

The room was not greatly disarranged. A partially eaten meal was on a table set for four. Doors to both kitchen and bedroom were open. The lighted lamp was in the latter. Challon entered the bedroom.

Tia Pozner huddled in a diagonal corner. One side of her face was swollen. Her mouth had bled a little and the red line from its corner made a thin, ugly scar down across the roundness of her chin and throat. Such clothing as remained on her was in ribbons, its disorder more callously revealing than complete nakedness. She sat in a cramped, unnatural position, into which she had obviously been flung.

Challon thought for a moment that she, also, was dead. Then he saw the movement of her breathing. He stepped back to the front door and signaled Bayard.

"Germaine's in here, dead. Get him out and clean up. Light a fire in the kitchen and put water on. Find Jim's whisky. Then wait outside and keep the boys quiet."

"'Lena?" Hank asked.

"No. Pozner's wife."

Challon returned to the bedroom and closed the door. Bending, he lifted the woman gently to the bed. He thought Pozner's wife was less than ten years older than 'Lena. She had her niece's fine, delicate shape of head and feature and body, although she was a little shorter. The proudest kind of Spanish-American beauty, without grossness in middle life.

He swore steadily as he removed the shreds of the woman's clothing. There was modest lace on the undergarments and primness to their fit and fastenings. Merciless malice had been behind the treatment given her. Malice capitalizing on the knowledge that women of her race and kind would rather have the secrets of their soul turned out to public gaze than the clothing next to their skin. Tia Pozner would not have appeared even before her husband in undress in a lighted room.

The legend of wantonness in Spanish-American women was not something which had grown on the grass, itself, but among outlanders who had come in. Beyond the exceptions which proved the rule, it was wholly untrue.

Challon found a scarf on the dresser and a kimono and slippers in the clothes press. He dressed the woman in these, wrapping the kimono well around her. He kicked the torn clothing he had removed well out of sight under the bed. And he spoke softly, steadily, gently in Spanish. Bayard came to the door, holding a big, steaming china mug.

"Fire wasn't out and I thought you'd be ready for this," he whispered. "Couldn't find Jim's whisky, but I had some on my saddle. She all right?"

"I think so. Thanks, Hank."

Challon pushed the door shut again. Tia Pozner drank the toddy obediently. The fixity in her eyes faded. They searched Challon's face. Suddenly they dropped to her own body and the kimono wrapping it.

"I came in alone," Challon told her. "The others are outside. I'm sorry we're late. What happened?"

The woman began to talk. A stark account, without hysteria. The three of them had been at supper—Pozner, his wife, and 'Lena. The Hyatts and Frank Germaine had ridden in, bushy-tailed over a brush with the XO crew. Pozner cursed them for their attempted drive of XO stock so early in the game. The Hyatts, angry at his lashing, rode off. Germaine, his eyes as much on 'Lena as Tia's supper, stayed.

A few minutes later riders poured into the yard. The dog barked and was shot. 'Lena and Germaine went out to investigate. 'Lena vanished and didn't return. Germaine ducked back into the house. The riders were XO men. They had the Hyatts, tied in their saddles. They wanted Pozner and Germaine.

The pattern of subsequent events was hard for Challon to determine. Apparently Van Cleave didn't want prisoners beyond the two already tied in their saddles. He demanded the surrender of the two men within the house and when Germaine, too young to be afraid of god or man, resisted,

Van Cleave shot him. Efficient murder, whitewashed with a tradition which took into no account the variance in skill between one man and another with a gun. Germaine had drawn first.

What followed had all too obviously been an attempt to force Pozner into the same defensive folly. Pozner had his courage and his wife hers. Jim had stood woodenly until she had finally been slapped into a corner. They had led him out and lashed him into a saddle like Simi and Ed Hyatt, then.

"They were taking them to the XO?" Challon asked Tia.

"To Range. They said they were taking them to jail at Range."

"'Lena? They must have gotten her, too!"

"They would have been fools not to try, but that one couldn't be taken quietly and I heard nothing from the yard. I think she got away."

Challon pulled open the door. "If she didn't, they'll wish she had!" he promised grimly. "You get some sleep. I'll have Jim back for breakfast."

"Why?" Tia Pozner asked woodenly. "He's been a burr in your back since he came here. You've wanted the lava open. He's kept it organized and closed. He's out of the way, now, and your hands are clean of it. Why do you do anything for him, now?"

"Not for him. The XO did this to you. I owe you something for it."

Challon stepped on through the door. Bayard was on the steps. Challon issued terse orders.

"Post the boys, Hank. Don't let anybody near the house. Start for Range as soon as it's light if I'm not back. But take it easy. They really gave her hell."

"You're pulling out alone?" Hank protested. "Damn it, Marc—you ain't Pierre!"

"No, I'm not Pierre," Challon agreed harshly. "I had Cy Van Cleave in my sights this afternoon and let him ride out of them. I've got to correct that mistake!"

"You won't even get to him unless I split the boys and come along with part of them."

"With both Van Cleave and Perigord sitting behind cocked guns in Range, waiting for me to come howling in with you behind me? No. I've got to handle this alone. Stay here till morning."

Challon swung to saddle. Bayard seized his stirrup leather.

"The hell with this riding to town, Marc!" he said with sudden savagery. "Get Prentice and that woman at the XO. That'll choke off the rest. You've waited too long already."

Chapter Nine

The Grass Is Ruthless

IT WAS a strange compulsion which drove Anson Prentice away from the *ramada* fronting the XO house. First he accused the soft night wind which came up as light failed. Then restlessness and uneasiness resulting from his talk with Marc Challon. A civilized man's instinctive reaction to the harsh brutality masked in Challon's quiet anger. Perhaps fear, but a physical fear. He would admit to no more than that. Challon's anger, for all its unexpected quiet, was a physical anger.

Finally, Prentice thought the reason he could not remain at the house was a principled courtesy within himself

which demanded that Challon and Marcy have privacy for the talk Challon so obviously desired. They were, by the mere mechanics of long association, still at least partially man and wife.

But all of these things were self-delusive and deliberate avoidance of fact. As he walked slowly across the ranch yard in the growing darkness, Prentice forced himself to this admission. He had given the relationship between Marcy and her husband no consideration in the beginning. It was not becoming that he do so. now. The real reason he had quit the front of the house was an uneasiness he always felt in or near the building. It was as though the house was the heart of the Challon Ranch, with a pulse and a life of its own, and the ranch itself was the entity to which the Challon name belonged, rather than to Pierre and his son.

He had taken Challon's wife. With Marcy he now held legal title to the ranch. But there were shadows within the house beyond his reach. He had not touched the springs of Marc Challon's existence. Perhaps he didn't even understand them. And the house would not accept Anson Prentice. He was alien to it. He thought he would always remain so.

A slight edge had worked into the wind. Prentice turned from the yard up onto the porch of the ranch store. The door was padlocked. He felt the ring of keys at his belt. A symbol of possession. He wondered what he actually had here beyond this meaningless, jangling ring of metal blanks. He fingered through them for the one which fitted this lock.

Anson had ordered the store closed when Marcy and himself had come out

from their meeting with Challon in Treadwell's office in Range. He had a purpose. The store was the one thing on the ranch he intended personally to change.

In the days of the Challons it had been open to every man on the pay roll and to such small neighbors as might find it convenient or necessary to trade on XO credit. Actually, it was the root of an occasionally used system of peonage, and shrewd enough for that reason. Pay-roll hands were paid in cash only the difference between their earned wages and their account at the store. Neighbors who could not meet their account paid in land when there was nothing else with which to settle their bills. And land was always acceptable tender to a building ranch.

Sound enough business, except that there were accounts as much as fifteen years in arrears with day-to-day purchases steadily increasing their totals and with no evidence of an attempt at collection at any time. Friends, Pierre Challon had once explained. Pensioners, Marc had called them. Both men had spoken in the same tolerant tone, apparently unconcerned at the swelling liability the store accounts represented.

There was something else wrong with the store. The XO bought in

wholesale quantities for it, but from local suppliers in Range, agreeably paying the Range mark-up instead of dealing directly with big houses in the East. Yet those who traded in the store could buy any item on the shelves at a price as low or lower than that posted by the mercantile houses in town. An additional loss, and deliberate ignorance of a potential source of profit. Challon had tried to explain this once, too.

"Something as big as a ranch needs friends. The store costs something, of course, although I don't think we've ever figured out just how much. But it brings some folks onto the XO that might not come, otherwise. And the prices we charge make friends of them. Maybe that doesn't show on the ledgers, Anse, but it's important. You can fight like hell with your neighbors down here, but they're still neighbors and have to be treated as such. That's the grass. You'll see."

Anson did not see. Marcy had not allowed him as much time as he would have liked, but he had been thoroughly over the store books since he had ordered it closed. And he was close to completion of a new plan of operation, under which it could be made to show a profit. The plan was important, although he couldn't explain its importance to Marcy.

He had put a great deal of money into Marcy's scheme to take over the XO, but not wholly for Marcy, herself. There was little accord between Anson Prentice and his father. What tie there was had been built on wealth—the desire of one to produce an heir capable of handling the paper empire and the power he had created; the desire of the other to be sufficiently suitable and in grace to inherit what the first had produced. Jason Prentice would understand Marcy, all right. The woman part of it—her desirability. Before wheat-trading and the railroad and advancing years had absorbed all of his energy, there had been body fires in Jason Prentice.

What the old man would not understand, what he would not believe, was that a sane man would pay a hundred and thirty thousand dollars for a woman for the single reason that she intoxicated him with a belief he was more virile and a more satisfactory companion than the man from whom he had taken her. Yet Anson was aware that this was essentially what he had done. The thing he had to avoid was sacrifice of the balance of his inheritance for that same woman. And it troubled him gravely when he was apart from Marcy.

His work on the store books was behind this. Marc Challon's careless appraisal of the XO had worked to Anson's advantage. The old man would back him up on the figure at which he had bought Challon out. The old man would likely even be vastly amused that a woman had come along as boot in the deal, since the acreage involved made the thing financially sound beyond a doubt. But Marcy wanted more than just another man. Anson was aware of this. She wanted more than just the share Challon had granted her in the XO. She wanted full control—legal ownership of the man who held the balance of the title. She wanted a recognized claim on whatever Anson Prentice would have from his father. She wanted marriage. And the old man would raise hell at this.

There was one solution. If Anson took hold of the XO, if he showed management skill in its operation, the old

man might concede Marcy was bringing his son something in compensation for what she wanted. Compensation was the keynote of Jason Prentice's life. If Marcy made a businessman out of his son, he would accept her on her own terms.

There was gall in this kind of thinking, but Anson knew himself and his father too well to avoid facts. And he knew his own limitations. He had no interest in the XO. He would not learn the cattle business. What he had seen of ranch management smelled too strongly of sweat and hard seasons. He had acquired the ranch only to acquire Marcy. If the XO was run, it would be by Marcy and men she hired. But the matter of the store was no more than simple arithmetic and a little book work, and it could be dressed up into an appearance of shrewd thinking and an evidence of a flair for efficiency. As a beginning project, it would make an arresting impression.

Prentice turned the key and the padlock fell open. He folded the hasp back and pushed the door inward. The dark interior of the store reached out with its mingled odors of foodstuffs confined in motionless air. He rasped a match to flame and lighted the tall lamp at one end of the counter. Almost at once he saw the bedding shelf had been stripped of blankets. Raising the counter gate, he stepped through it.

The displaced blankets had been loosely spread on the floor behind the counter, out of sight from the windows. A man lay huddled on them. One of the new hands who had arrived on the ranch with Cy Van Cleave. His dirty shirt was thick with hardening blood. Prentice knew by the color of his face that he was dead.

He tried to remember when he had seen a dead man before. Never like this, certainly. Not without the softening and impersonalization an undertaker achieved. Not when death was so bloody and ugly and there were neither tapers nor music in the background. He looked curiously at the man on the floor behind the counter because he had never really thought of death before and it took him time to realize it could be like this.

Backing slowly through the counter, Anson returned to the door and closed it, shooting the night bolt on the inside without knowing why he did so. He trimmed the counter light a little lower and stepped back through the gate, kneeling beside the dead man with a steadiness which surprised him.

This was an XO hand. He was dead of a gunshot wound. A companion or companions, presumably also XO men, had hidden him in the locked store on the obvious assumption that his discovery here was unlikely. Prentice judged the man had been alive when he was carried in. The scant offering of comfort afforded by the blankets on the floor attested to that. Sometime during the previous night, probably very late. Not today, certainly, as the crew had quit the ranch early in the morning, immediately after a talk between Marcy and Van Cleave and a couple of brothers from out on the lava. And the crew had not returned. This man had been hidden here with Van Cleave's knowledge. There were only three keys to the lock on the door. Van Cleave had one of them.

Anson remembered a sharp question Challon had asked him in front of the house. Something about looking in the XO corrals for horses winded by a hard night ride southward over the mesas. Tensing with aversion, he searched the

dead man's pockets.

Cigarette makings. A knife with the bone gone from one side of the handle. A jumble of loose matches. Three clanking silver dollars and some change. In a breast pocket, stained along one edge by blood from the wound which had killed him, a thin packet of crisp bills in a wrapper bearing the imprint of Donaldson and Kane, Kansas City—bankers to Jason Prentice and the Santa Fe.

Anson took only these, shaking out a fresh handkerchief and wrapping them into it before shoving them into his own pocket. His breath was unsteady. After blowing twice across the chimney of the lamp without killing the light, he turned the wick down until it snuffed itself. He did not refasten the hasp and padlock on the door.

Coming up through the yard, he saw a big man swing onto a horse before the house. Recognizing Challon, he was momentarily tempted to call to him, knowing that Marc would have an answer for this and an instant's decision. A decision Anson didn't want to make, himself. But before he called Challon's name he remembered the chill and bitter hatred in Marc's eyes and he knew the time was past for help from a Challon in anything.

For the first time he began to think beyond himself as far as Marcy was concerned. For the first time he stood in Challon's boots. For an instant he saw exactly what he had done to the man. He stood without movement, very quiet in the yard, until Challon vanished toward the main gate.

When Marc was gone, Anson moved on toward the front of the house. He had nearly reached the *ramada* when another rider appeared out of the darkness. He must have passed Challon near the gate, but there had been no exchange of greeting. Anson lengthened his stride. The newcomer did not pull up at the head of the gravel path but came on diagonally across the carefully kept lawn.

Prentice realized the man's horse was picking its own way without attention from its rider, that it was taking the shortest route to the corral. As he reached the lower end of the *ramada*, Anson heard Marcy's voice and realized she had come out of the house to watch Challon's departure.

"*Quien es?*" she asked in the universal night query of the country.

The man in the saddle stiffened, lost his balance as a result of this shift, and spilled down. Marcy spoke again, something Anson did not clearly hear, and she leaped to half catch the man as he fell. The horse shied away and trotted across the lawn toward the work yard. Prentice reached Marcy as she straightened the man's body on the *ramada* flagging.

"Who is it?" he asked, repeating her question in English.

"Tom Halliard. Shot. Get his feet. We'll take him inside—"

"How, Marcy?" Anson asked as he hooked the man's ankles.

"With a gun!" Marcy snapped. "Marc's gun!"

"I just saw Marc leave. There wasn't any shot."

"This afternoon, someplace on the lava. Not here. Marc was boasting about it to me. Here, get him up. He's too heavy for me."

Anson shifted his grip on Halliard's body and swung it up with a pulling effort. Marcy held the door open, then led the way swiftly back through the house to the kitchen. At a gesture from her, he rolled Halliard onto the big

kitchen work table.

Marcy came around with a lamp and for the first time he saw Halliard's face. His gorge rose and the room tilted. He gripped the edge of the table hard.

Marcy put the lamp down. She bent close to the injured man and began probing with forceps fashioned of her thumb and index finger in the terrible wound which had opened Halliard's cheek. Anse clung to the table while she plucked out two brightly stained fragments which he recognized with horror as teeth. Marcy slapped him hard with her eyes.

"You asked me if Marc was serious in his shooting talk the day we told him about us. He had his gun in his hand. He could have done this to you, Anson."

"My God, you mean this was deliberate?"

"A Challon can hit a fly on the wing with anything that will shoot. Bring me a sheet out of the press and a bottle of your whisky."

Anson reeled out of the room, thinking of mountains which exploded, raining rock over half a county, of grass as endless as the sea and in many ways as baffling, of a tall old man who went to a strange place in search of a bride, and of a man so ruthless in anger that he would deliberately inflict on another the kind of a wound Tom Halliard had brought back to the XO.

An hour later Halliard was in his bed at the bunkhouse with the yard boy to sit beside him, alternately listening to the unintelligible flow of his pain-laced profanity and helping him get the neck of a whisky bottle into his shattered mouth to drink a little of the universal narcotic of the grasslands.

Prentice had come back to the main house. Marcy, misunderstanding his purpose, had disappeared into her bedroom. He sat in the living-room, hunched deep in a big chair, listening to the sound of water splashing in a basin as Marcy washed the marks of her crude, dispassionate surgery from her hands and arms.

There was war in Prentice. He had asked for some of this. He had believed there was hunger in him. He had thought that he had a taste for the elemental and that contact with it would lift his pulse. Only Marcy had not done that. Much of what he had wanted in New Mexico he had not found. One of the things he might have wanted—the friendship of Marc Challon—would have cost him Marcy, and he had believed the price was too high.

The rest of this grass country was no different from Kansas or Missouri or Illinois. Essentially unfriendly, distrusting him for no better reason than the tailoring marks on his clothes and his father's name on the letterheads of the Santa Fe. Small, busy people, engrossed in their own way of life, unwilling to open a door to it for him and both unwilling and unable to understand his need. All but Marcy. He was grateful to her for this and at war now because for the first time he was forced to take a stand he instinctively knew she would oppose.

She came out presently, smiling a little because she thought she not only knew his features but his thoughts. Her arms and face glowed with soaping and toweling. She looked young almost to a point of girlishness. Almost, but not quite. The full challenge of a woman's wisdom was in her eyes. She

dropped down on the arm of his chair. The fingers of one hand slid under the uneven lie of his thin hair, ruffling it.

"Poor Anse," she said softly. "It takes such a long time to get used to the grass."

"I've got to go into Range tonight, Marcy."

The fingers retraced their path across his scalp, ending with a quick, gentle tug on the cowlick which would not lie straight from his crown.

"Why? There's nothing in Range tonight you couldn't find here on the XO."

"Halliard—that face—he ought to have a doctor!"

"What could a doctor do that we haven't already done? Marc is thorough. I've told you that before. No doctor could do anything for that face. Even Halliard doesn't care about it, now. He wants it to stop hurting, maybe. But mostly he wants to get back on his feet so he can go hunting for Marc Challon. That's all. Ask him. He'll tell you."

"The shooting ought to be reported—Marc, if he did it!"

"Is your nose turning blue, Anse? What ought and ought not to be done—from you! We'll do best to keep all the XO business we can out of Range. Van Cleave and the crew will show up some time tonight. They'll take care of Halliard and anything involving him that needs attention. They're his friends. Give them time. They'll take care of Marc, too. And they understand their business. They'll earn their pay. You and I have no need for any night rides."

"Just how do you take care of a man like Marc Challon, Marcy?"

She frowned a little. "Break him. Hit him hard and break him into a million pieces that can't be put together again. If he won't break that small, you drive him—drive him hard, till he quits the country!"

"But if he doesn't quit?"

"You kill him, Anse. I told you Cy Van Cleave knows his business!"

"You're talking murder!"

"I'm talking common sense and you know it. We quit worrying about Marc Challon months ago, both of us. We're the ones who are important. Marc can't scare Van Cleave, Anson. He can't scare us while Van Cleave is on the XO. A man doesn't get to be called a rattlesnake in this country for nothing!"

"I'm not worrying about Challon. I'm worrying about us. Halliard isn't the only man on the place with a bullet in him tonight. There's a dead man behind the counter in the store. One of Van Cleave's men. This was in his pocket—"

Anson unwrapped the thin, stained packet of banknotes. "My father's in Trinidad. You read the letter he sent me by messenger about the holdup last night. You remember he said he was writing Sheriff Perigord, too. I'm sorry, Marcy, but I've got to go into town. Perigord has got to know about this!"

Marcy ruffled the bills, then tossed them onto a table.

"Can't the railroad take care of its own business? Haven't you got enough to keep you busy here, Anse?"

She leaned farther on the arm of his chair. Her eyes lengthened. Her lips parted a little.

"—Haven't you, Anse?"

She leaned still farther toward him. Prentice did not know if she finally lost her balance or if he pulled her toward him. Marcy laughed softly and straightened a little. He thought it was

a sigh. It wasn't. It was an intake for a sudden explosion of breath which blew out the lamp.

Chapter Ten

Ley de Fuga

THE dying fire in Marc Challon's camp under Tinaja was a red eye in the night. The unpleasant odor of burned wool drifted over it. 'Lena had been certain from the last ridge that the camp was deserted, but she approached cautiously.

Tracks were thick about the embers. A fused crust overlay them. Bedrolls, blankets, duffel even to a saddle had been burned. The contents of the cooking-shelter had been methodically destroyed. A gap had been torn in the brush corral. Challon's horses were gone. Van Cleave had been as thorough here as he had undoubtedly been at Jim Pozner's.

'Lena sank down on a patch of grass. The fear which had run with her through the barrancas had exhausted her.

Supper sign was about; Challon and his men had been here earlier. The XO had plainly come directly from Pozner's, passing her in the *malpais*. Challon could have been traveling in the opposite direction on a higher and shorter track. Waiting was difficult, but there was nothing else. The horses she had hoped to find here were gone and even with them, there was nowhere to go. Range, perhaps, where small people would share her fury but would not buck the XO under any management, talking much and earnestly under their own roofs but too wise to defend men from the lava on a street where Hugh Perigord walked. The shadow of the Challons was deeply etched across the doorways of Red River County. Only a Challon could change its pattern.

'Lena lay on the grass and thought of the man for whom she waited. She had not lied here under Tinaja in saying all who knew her knew also that she wanted Marc Challon. Not the XO —the great ranch—only the man. Land to a woman was but a roof over her head, a right to a little pride among her neighbors, and a source of living. It did not take a hundred thousand acres to enclose her desires. Four walls would do as well—four walls and Marc Challon. A physical want, like that for food, and with its own kind of hunger —sometimes as intolerable to bear.

Barely fifteen minutes in the camp, 'Lena heard horses on the slope. She flattened against the sod and presently watched Challon ride up to the fire, his big and loosely built body almost shapeless in his saddle, masking the fact that it was a coiled spring, waiting for a trigger-touch to explode. He was leading an extra horse.

A range man's skills were his instincts. This was one of the animals loosed by the XO here. Challon had found time to retrieve it, even now. It was not hard to understand how the two Challons had been able to build an empire here while others from the same roots only dreamed.

'Lena lay quietly in the grass while Challon studied the ruin of the camp. She knew a man was like a child, wanting privacy when it was hurt or troubled. A woman was a comfort, but not in the first moments, when the sting was sharp. Later—perhaps later.

Presently Challon called her name,

experimentally, but with concern. She didn't answer until he had called a second time and she was sure of his concern and fear and sure of something else. Then she rose.

"*Aqui*, Marc—here."

He came quickly to her, big hands closing painfully on the points of her shoulders. There was so much a man could say to a woman without words.

"You dodged them, all right?"

'Lena nodded, voicing her own unwilling question: "Tia—?"

"All right. Roughed up, but she had more sand than they did. She's all right, 'Lena. Bayard and the boys are with her."

'Lena exhaled softly. Cy Van Cleave had earned the name attached to him. Tia was young enough for beauty and she was Spanish—Mexican. She would have fought anything beyond mishandling with tiger strength and all the Territory knew Van Cleave could not resist a woman who fought.

"Jim's all right, too, I think," Challon went on. "They took him off to jail with the Hyatts. But not hurt."

"Frank—?" 'Lena asked.

"Germaine's dead," Challon said bluntly. "He wasn't as smart as Jim and your aunt. He bowed up and Van Cleave got him. He should have known."

A flat and dispassionate condemnation of a dead man who had a few hours before sat at supper with her, watching the play of shadows at the base of her throat and making conversation. Young and personable, talking well and laughing easily. Now he was dead and condemned without resentment as a fool by Marc Challon because he had not known, as Jim and Tia and Challon himself knew, that life was more important on the grass than pride or principle or belief. You swallowed these when necessary or you died. The kind which stood against a challenge to one of these were fools. They didn't survive.

Marc Challon surrendered his ranch to win it back on the last turn of the cards. Jim Pozner watched the hands of other men on his wife in silence because he wanted to live. Tia was roughed and endured it because she wanted Jim to live. 'Lena Casamajor rode into the lava with a man she loved, knowing she involved herself and others in his quarrel, because she wanted him in the end. They were the strong ones. Frank Germaine was a fool.

"Headed for the ranch, Marc?" she asked.

Challon shook his head. "There once today. That's enough. Now I've located you and you're all right, I'm going on into town. You go back to Pozner's. Stick with your aunt. You'll be all right there. Hank's got his orders."

"You can't do anything in town, Marc!" 'Lena protested earnestly. "If they're in jail, they've got them cold. Jim wasn't with the Hyatts today, but he can't prove it."

Challon flexed his hands and began drawing on the gloves he had peeled from his fingers as he came up to her.

"The hell he can't!" he said grimly. "Jim's got a good witness. I was on the rim above that drive today."

'Lena felt muscles across her belly tighten. Germaine and the Hyatts had speculated about the rifleman above them who had broken up the XO's trap. They hadn't considered Marc Challon among the possibilities. Neither had Jim Pozner, listening to them. They believed Challon was bluffing. They believed he was in a losing game

with no real intention of fighting. It was strange these grim lava men could hate another so long and battle him so constantly as they had Marc Challon and still have no real measurement of him. Marc was not bluffing. Probably he had never bluffed in his life.

"They won't believe you in town, either, Marc," she said. "You're not the XO, now."

"Maybe Van Cleave won't listen—or Perigord. But the town knows me and neither Perigord or Van Cleave can buck every vote in the county. I promised your aunt I'd have Jim back by breakfast. I aim to do that."

"I wish you could," 'Lena breathed. "But don't be a fool—like Frank Germaine, Marc! There isn't anything in this county but the XO. The Challons made it like that. Folks in Range have forgotten how to buck the ranch. They won't listen to you. They're my people. I know them."

'Lena saw Challon remained unconvinced. She followed him as he moved toward his horse.

"It wasn't your fists or the men you hired that made the ranch what it was when you left it. It was something inside of your father—inside of you. Bigness. I can't think of another word. You've destroyed that—given up the ranch for no reason anyone can believe in and run your father off to Denver. After publishing everybody out here as outlaws for years, you've cozied up to Jim Pozner and the lava people. You and I are the only two people in Red River County tonight that don't think you're a damned fool, and I'm not even sure of one of us. Go into town and you'll be walking right in where Perigord and Van Cleave want to have you!"

Challon mounted. "Tell Hank I've changed my mind about him bringing your aunt into town in the morning, then. Tell him to stay where he is until he hears from me."

"He'll believe a message I deliver?"

"He better! Tell him that, too, *Chinita*—"

Challon reined away. 'Lena waited patiently until he was out of earshot, then quieted the bay he had led out of the brush and pulled herself onto the animal's back. She could think of only one thing, now. A thing requiring precious time, but which could be made shorter by driving straight for the pass, missing Range altogether, relying on people of her own blood along the way. Marc Challon needed help and in 'Lena's mind there was only one source from which it could come. No man was ever sufficient unto himself.

Range lay on the grass at the foot of the mesa like a woman waiting for a man—silent, eyes closed and slow of breath, but expectant and so very awake. The courthouse, containing Perigord's office and the jail, stood slightly apart from neighboring buildings. Across the street a light burned in the lobby of the Range Hotel. Three doors away, its racks lined with XO riding-stock, was the Red River Saloon. There was a subdued glow from it, also. Van Cleave would be in the Red River and Van Cleave men would be behind the courthouse. Such a man clung to life only by precautions approaching the ridiculous.

Perigord was different. He had no men behind him—only a star. He would be in his office. On occasion one man

could be more difficult to face than many, but the men from the lava were Perigord's prisoners—as long as he could hold them. Challon rode for the courthouse.

A man whistled a single brief note in the night air as he dismounted. A cigarette glowed at the corner of the building. Boots sounded on the opposite walk before the Red River. Challon pushed open Perigord's unlocked door.

Two men wanted Marc Challon's death tonight. One had been hired by a woman to break Challon and would add enormously to his own peculiar stature by Challon's death. The other had been elected to office by the XO and could most easily break the domination which had actually made him always an XO employee by putting a bullet into Challon's body. Either would have to earn his chance.

Perigord rose behind his desk. "Marc, you got no business here!"

"I promised Jim Pozner's wife his company at breakfast. Bring your keys. We're going out back."

"I'm holding those men on a proper complaint, Marc!"

"Signed by Cy Van Cleave! Get the gates open, Hugh!"

Perigord shrugged and moved back into the jail corridor. Pozner and the Hyatts appeared at their gratings. Pozner spoke:

"You cut it thin, Challon!" Marc nodded. "Tia—?" Pozner added.

"All right. Worried about you but all right."

Simi Hyatt spat at his grating as Perigord slowly fingered through his keys.

"Bayard and your boys sure come in quiet, Challon. How's it feel to have a town so hand-whipped it won't even chew at you when you're on the wrong side of the fence?"

"Hank's at Jim's place with his wife and 'Lena," Challon said.

Pozner gripped the bars before him in sudden alarm. "You come in alone? You wall-eyed fool! They been waiting for this, Challon. *Ley de fuga*—the law of escape. The lava bunch, trying to break jail—and you helping us—to a quick grave!"

Pozner's was a hard, honest fear, without cowardice, valid and compelling. Challon glanced at Perigord. The man was tense. Somewhere up front there was sound. Dawn wind against a casement—or a door latching softly open. The single clearly whistled note Challon had heard as he dismounted sounded again on the street. A man swore suddenly out there. Hugh Perigord tilted out a little from the wall against which he had been leaning.

"Marc, I'm halfway sorry—" he said.

Pozner shouted and Perigord reached for his gun. Challon flung himself aside in a flattening twist which carried him into the mouth of the corridor leading back from Perigord's office, and he snapped his own weapon upward from his belt. He knew he would be hit, but he had an instant of hard satisfaction that he would kill Hugh Perigord in the exchange.

Then, before Perigord fired—before Challon himself was braced for hurt—a tremendous blow struck the flat of Marc's back, driving him stumbling and helplessly forward onto his knees and then onto his face. His lips were crushed against the worn pine planking of the floor of the jail corridor before he heard the shot, and then only dimly, echoing and re-echoing in ragged cadence in the corridor, in the street outside, and in his head. . . .

Chapter Eleven

Like Calls to Like

PRENTICE could not sleep, the narcotic of Marcy's lips, her presence, failing when he most needed it. The room was hot, oppressive, and he thought of this as he had often before, remembering an evening in his first weeks on the XO. Full dark, a soft night, and Marc on business in Denver. He had sat with Marcy under the cottonwoods east of the house, watching a moon of enormous size pull up out of the lava country. His impatience and eagerness in those first days made Prentice vaguely sick in recollection, now. He had touched Marcy and she had risen abruptly, returning to the house.

It was hours later, in Challon's study, the night shut away behind closed windows and doors, that he learned Challon's wife had not been retreating from him but from the openness of the night. Marcy blossomed fullest in complete darkness, with walls and ceilings and the certainty of closed doors about her. It wasn't modesty. What she cultivated in shadow was not something which could flourish in open air.

The windows were tightly closed now, Marcy's breathing steady and slightly stertorous for one so young and slender of body. A clear conscience could sleep so soundly and Prentice understood this—there was no conscience in Marcy.

He rose cautiously, moved down the hall, and dressed in the study. He smelled the odor of sweat and remembered this was a big man's room—Marc Challon's room—that he was alien to this unforgiving house. Regardless of his position with Marcy, the money he invested here, or the documents which had been signed, time would not change this.

Outside, wind moved across from the corral and there was another odor. As he stepped into the barn to take his saddle from the rack there he realized he had been careless in stepping somewhere and had dung on his boots. He felt a mental nausea.

Over the pass, somewhere along the Santa Fe, a gray old man was building miles of rails in his mind tonight and maybe thinking of a son he didn't know, a son he had never known. Young Anson, showing for the first time the complete wilfullness which had made his father a rich man. Anson wanted a woman. Neither the fact that she was the wife of a powerful and dangerous man or that she was probably a thorough-going bitch made any difference. Not Jason Prentice's exact way of doing things, but a decisive action and therefore good. There was iron in Anson or he could not have done this. Time would temper iron into the steel a man needed to stand on his own feet and cast his shadow apart from others.

Knowing his father and assuming these distant thoughts, Prentice felt fouled by more than the dung on his boots. He knew his own metal. Not iron. Not steel. With utterly ruthless self-analysis, he knew he was a complete coward. He mounted his saddled horse and rode across the yard. Abreast of the house he halted for a moment.

Marcy lay within. He could return to her. But a realization had come to him as he listened to her deep breath-

ing tonight. He had never owned her. Marc Challon had never owned her. By a queer obtuseness of event, he had hurt Challon less than he had done him a great service. Gigging his horse to motion again, turning his back on the first faint promise of day already beginning to lighten the eastern horizon, he took the road to Range.

There was a willow clump at the edge of town. Prentice pulled up in it. What he did now took him out of the audience of the interested, where he had been sitting, and shoved him into the middle of the stage. As he had much earlier tonight, he felt again desire for Marc Challon's blunt, curiously direct counsel. Challon, however, would be hard to find and harder to make listen. So there was only Perigord. And Prentice distrusted the sheriff of Red River County.

He saw horses racked along the street ahead and feared some belonged to Van Cleave's men. There was a shadow beyond the county building and another under the awning of the Red River Saloon. Waiting men. A single big, hard-ridden horse was at the rail before the sheriff's office. Prentice was wondering about this animal when the sound of a bunch of rapidly oncoming horses rose behind him on the road in from the east. Knowing he would be flushed out as this party came through the willows, he started on into the town, traversing the lower hundred yards of the street with the party from the grass rapidly overtaking him.

He heard a man swear suddenly. Farther along another whistled a sharply clear note. The man under the saloon awning trotted across the street to the door of the sheriff's office. He recognized Van Cleave.

The party from the grass slanted into the street behind him, Hank Bayard's lean figure on the lead horse. Bayard's flat-toned voice raised in a yell. Range, apparently sleeping so soundly, awoke in an instant. Anson pulled aside, up over the uncertain planking of the walk to clear the street for those behind him.

A single shot sounded within the courthouse, followed by three more in rapid succession. The door of the sheriff's office burst open. Van Cleave and Perigord spilled out of it, both moving at high speed toward the front of the Range Hotel. Van Cleave shouted something as he ran.

Men poured from the saloon and also raced for the hotel. One dropped to a knee and fired at Bayard's party. The fire was returned, its explosiveness making Prentice's mount restive. The animal danced back across the walk and one of Bayard's companions veered toward Prentice, gun recklessly high.

"Here's Prentice!" he sang out.

"Grab him!" Bayard yelled. "But keep moving!"

Prentice's horse went with the others without direction. He was picked up by a wild wind, carried along, and dropped in a sudden eddy before the door of Perigord's office. Gun sound had penetrated him until it beat in the hammering of his pulse. He heard the swift anger of driven lead and a man to his left as he hit the walk clutched his side, looked at a red fountain spurting between his fingers, and uttered a protest in a conversational tone which made his words the only sane sound in a bedlam:

"Jesus! Oh, Jesus!"

Somebody shoved Anson through the door. In a moment the street and its

violence were behind him and he was in a corridor, staring at three cell gates, unlocked and standing open. Four men lay in their own blood on the corridor planking. One of them was Marc Challon. A man ducked into the empty cells and out.

"Cut 'em down through the bars, then unlocked the cells and dragged 'em out here. Van Cleave and Perigord. Seen 'em both run out as we rode in!"

"Pozner's still alive but going fast," another man cut in. "Bullet clean through the head. The Hyatts never finished the breath they were on."

Hank Bayard was on the floor, lifting Marc Challon's powerful body. Prentice looked at this, attention drawn unwillingly by the soft, concentrated fluency of the most terrible profanity he had ever heard on a man's lips. Hank swore from the heart and there were fresh furrows on his cheeks. With a kind of incredulity, Prentice saw they were cut by tears.

Challon's lips were injured. Prentice couldn't tell if the blood on them was from surface abrasions or internal flow. The man's strength, his vitality, was evident. His shirt covered a frightful wound in his back, but his eyes opened and focused on Bayard, flinting in accusation.

"I told 'Lena to tell you to stay at Jim's, Hank!" he said faintly.

Bayard blinked. "'Lena—hell, I ain't seen her!"

Challon put his hands down on the floor on either side of him, supporting the weight of his sagging shoulders.

"'Lena!" he said in a stronger voice. "Hank, get me out of here. We got to find her!"

Bayard looked at the men bunched above him. "Three of you give me a hand with the boss. Rest of you get out front and clean the street. Drop everything that moves. We're going out of here. And take this with you—" He nodded savagely at Prentice. "When we're back on the grass we'll find what he knows about this. Keep him in talking shape!"

A gun dented Prentice's ribs, hurting. He thought of Challon's wound and his stomach surged upward. Only a second ramming blow prevented him from vomiting. He staggered back down the corridor toward the street. Behind him Hank Bayard and three others lifted Marc Challon with curious gentleness.

Marcy awakened with awareness of something wrong and turned instinctively. Anson was gone. She dressed swiftly and went into the yard. Cy Van Cleave and the crew had not returned during the night. Compressing her lips, she turned toward the store, remembering the blood-edged bills Anson had so concernedly brought up to the house.

The dead man still lay behind the store counter. So Anson had been right. Van Cleave had staged the Santa Fe holdup. Anger tugged at Marcy. When she hired a man she expected him to work wholly for her. Finding a horse and Anson's saddle missing from the barn, she returned to the house.

So he had run to the law! She was a little amused by this tug of righteousness in Anson, but it didn't lessen her anger. He was a thin man, pale of body and emotion, moving in an orbit essentially as small as the circumference of a silver dollar. She knew the usefulness of this narrowness but she hated him for it as she hated the necessity of her own ambition—the prodi-

gality of waste she had spent on Anson Prentice to lift herself from the roots of this New Mexico grass.

She kindled a fire in the kitchen and set coffee on, frowning. Anson's poor judgment in this ride to town was essentially a personal matter between them, she thought—revolt against a control she had to maintain—and of no real danger to her position or plans, except for one thing. To be successful—to one day move in the circle of glittering, idle women such men supported—Marcy knew she must make peace with Anson's father. And Jason Prentice was, in his own mind, the Santa Fe Railroad. The theft in the pass had been a personal blow at him. He could quite obviously accept the alliance between his son and another man's wife, but she knew he would buck if he became convinced that woman's ranch was being used as a base of harrying operations against his road. Anson would have to be halted before his tattling made real trouble. And Van Cleave would have to be pulled up before he committed further errors.

Presently, sipping coffee, Marcy went on to consider Perigord's likely reaction to the message Anson had carried to him. Perigord had, she thought, assiduously been courting the rails since the withdrawal of the Challons from effectiveness in the county. But it seemed unlikely he would act too swiftly on Anson's information about Van Cleave, even to make an impression of efficiency on Santa Fe officials. He would be certain to see that Van Cleave had involved the XO and that the XO involved Anson. Perigord was too wise to go to the father until he was sure the son was clear. She thought she would have time to bring both Anson and Van Cleave to heel.

Strangely, this conclusion did not completely ease her. She had wanted a hard man to pitch against Marc Challon's hardness, and Van Cleave was hard enough. But she didn't know him. Like herself, he wore none of the familiar brands by which men as well as animals were identified in this country. Like herself, he preferred to look outward with one face and inward with another. She thought she might be afraid of Van Cleave but for one thing. He was a man and she had been born with the means to handle any man. It was paradoxical, perhaps even a step in retreat, to use the same implements on a strutting little grass-country badman as upon the son of a major stockholder in a great railroad, but ends were attainable only by means.

Warmed and awakened by her coffee, Marcy began breakfast—the thin, aged little breakfast steaks with which the Challons had taught her to begin the day. Her spirits rose. Of all the XO house, Marcy resented the kitchen least. A big room, cheerful with the east sun, arranged so that a woman didn't have to walk the equivalent of a length of line fence to prepare a meal. Its pleasure was not all a matter of efficiency, either. Belle Challon had known a kitchen was the heart of a house—a place of companionship, gossip, and occasionally even idleness. There was room here for them all.

She had two steaks smoking in a skillet and was setting a place at the big table when the back door opened without a knock and closed again. She turned.

Cy Van Cleave had come in from the yard. He had not removed his hat and was standing motionless, looking at her. The devil was laughing in his

eyes.

She stared fixedly back, knowing she should be angry and equally well that she was not. Guards were somehow down and she was looking at Cy Van Cleave for the first time. A small, compact man with a towering surety, physically engineered to be exactly what he was.

No softening quirks, no flabbiness, no impracticality. Cleanly efficient, dispassionately ruthless, repellently beautiful as a honed blade of steel. So like herself that neither could deny the kinship. She saw him read her thoughts keenly and she flushed with what he read. He removed his hat, then, and dropped into a chair with a faint show of weariness.

"Breakfast ready? I'm hungry as hell."

Marcy went out onto the porch for two more steaks and looked into the yard. Only five horses at the rail, dusty and hard-ridden. No more. And twenty men had left the ranch with Van Cleave. She returned to the kitchen and dropped the fresh steaks into the skillet. Van Cleave spoke from behind her.

"You aren't going to like this—"

Marcy was thinking of the magnetism this man had radiated and the change it would work in her long plans. "I don't like it already!" she said.

"Things sort of went wrong in town last night. We picked up Pozner and the Hyatts for bait. Worked that far, all right. Challon came in after them—alone, like I figured he would, counting on the size of his breeches in Range and not much else. Almost got away with it, too."

"But he didn't? Then he's in jail with the others!"

"He's dead," Van Cleave said. "Dead as I know how to make a man."

Chapter Twelve

Pierre Comes Home

MARCY did not move for a long moment. When she did, she burned her hand on the skillet. She wet the burn with her lips. There was unreality to this, for all its inevitability.

Marc Challon dead! She had dreaded this instant, knowing it would come. Now it was here and she must move past it, relegating it with the rest of past things to a place of no importance. She clung to this thought and forced herself to speak as slowly and dispassionately as Van Cleave.

"You said things went to hell in town—"

Van Cleave tilted back his head. He spoke wryly, as though events had resulted from error on his part and he now suffered his own discipline. Challon hadn't been expecting help from the grass. He was sure of this. But Bayard had come into Range, too late to help Marc but rolling like thunder down from the mesas—smashing into the courthouse and out again, taking Challon's body with them. Not any of the others—just Challon's body.

Marcy drank her coffee slowly. The inescapable sentiment of the grass. No more practical a man than Bayard ever lived, but he couldn't sever his devotion to Challon with death and so blindly took the grave risk of retreating under gunfire to carry the man's body away. A kind of sentiment missing from Cy Van Cleave, adding immensely to his usefulness and the

queer, unwanted attraction Marcy felt toward him. A snake-and-bird attraction—Marcy smiled inwardly at her own simile. A taloned hawk was safe enough from the rattlesnake of Mora—

"Anson found one of your men dead in the store with some Santa Fe money in his pocket," she said quietly. "You weren't hired to hold up trains."

Van Cleave drew his gun and put it on the table between them. "That's what I was hired for and we both know it. I don't ride calluses onto my tail for a foreman's pay while you play for the big stakes. I'm keeping you in your game and you'll keep me in mine. Railroad money spends as good as any other and I've got a use for it."

"Anson went in to—"

"I saw him in town and guessed why he was there," Van Cleave cut in. "That's the part you're not going to like. He showed up in the middle of things and Bayard snagged him. Took him along when that bunch quit town. The mood those boys are in, I'd hate to be in Prentice's shoes!"

Coffee spilled from Marcy's cup. "You could have kept Anson clear of Bayard in town!"

"Maybe—if I'd tried," Van Cleave agreed. "But I had to talk to you, first."

Knowing fully the grave danger Anson Prentice was in now and fighting a vision of the colossal ruin his death could work with her planning, Marcy drew a deep breath.

"I'm listening," she said.

"This country's like a horse with an empty saddle," Van Cleave told her. "You knocked down the rider it was used to when you run the Challons off this ranch. Perigord's sold his soul to the railroad, hoping the Santa Fe'll give him a leg-up to the empty seat. But I want it and I aim to beat him to it. The XO's going to be my stirrup."

"The XO belongs to me."

"To Prentice—now. But you figure on marrying him and getting to hell out of here—with the getting out the thing that's important to you. Big cities and plush living. I want the XO when you're through with it. A chance to make men jump without prodding them with a gun. A chance to leave a lot I'd as soon forget behind me. Don't tell me you got to take this up with Prentice, either. You may not get the chance!"

Van Cleave calmly refilled his coffee cup. An oppressive sense of repetition crowded in on Marcy. Once before she had heard a tremendous larceny involving the XO as calmly expressed:

"It's really very simple, Marc; we want the ranch—"

"That's all you want?" she asked.

Van Cleave had crossed to the stove to serve their plates. He studied her over his shoulder, line for line and shadow for shadow, finally shrugging.

"Depends on how good you cook. I'm done eating with the crew in the cookshack. Maybe I'll like it. I don't know."

Marcy lifted her knife and fork when her plate was in front of her. Here was her language, her way of thinking. Here was a challenge no man had offered her. She needed Van Cleave now as she would not need the XO when she married Anson. She had occasionally felt vastly alone, here under the mesas. She did not, now. To be done with posing was like wriggling free of corset and stays after a hot day of being dressed for town.

"Sit down, Cy," she said. "Breakfast's getting cold."

Van Cleave spoke around his first mouthful of steak. "We'll have a line

on Prentice in a couple of hours. That's where the rest of the boys are now—trying to pick up Bayard's tracks. When we know where they're hiding him we'll go after your million dollars."

The sun made a furnace of the coach interior, although this was near the summit of the pass, almost eight thousand feet above the sea. It was the dark rock of the mesa, glazed by volcano heat to incredible mirror smoothness, which magnified the heat. But it was not heat which churned 'Lena's stomach over beneath the tight bodice of the dress Pierre Challon had bought for her in Denver. There had been Territory news at Trinidad—shocking and terrible news—and the road over the pass was so long.

'Lena leaned from the coach window in mute appeal to the driver above for more speed, but the wind would have been slow. Gravel rattled in a steady hail against the floorboards and sprayed widely at each of the incessant turns. The coach rocked wildly. A magician was at the reins.

Beside her, Pierre Challon dropped a great, mottled hand onto 'Lena's knee. Long, once-powerful fingers closed, exerting pressure through the fabric of the dress.

"There's plenty of time, *Chinita*," he said quietly. "No use hurrying, now. You need a drink. Lean back. I'll fetch you one."

'Lena tilted against the cushions, watching the man beside her, wondering if at the end of so many years Marc Challon would have been so great a man with so much of life carved into the lines of his face and the deepening shadows of his eyes. Father and son were so much alike in other ways that she thought this would have been so. Now she would never know. Marc Challon was dead.

Pierre uncorked an ornate silver pocket flask and the pleasant odor of good whisky rose from it. Whisky was a man's antidote to shock. 'Lena wondered if there really was an antidote for a woman in like case. If there was, she didn't know it, and neither did Pierre Challon. She drank a little but the churning within her didn't ease.

She thought of her ride northward from Tinaja. Without money, extra clothing—with a horse to which she could prove no right of use. High mesas and sandy grass along the base of the great mountains—grass unaccountably so much poorer than the rich grama below Boundary Mesa. The Huerfano and the Arkansas and the sandhills. Cherry Creek, the gaunt spire of Castle Rock, and so trailing dust into Denver. Riding from friend to friend, *casa* to *casita*. Sandoval Plaza, the sheep camp of a cousin of the Archuletas, a section shack along the rustless rails of General Palmer's Denver and Rio Grande Western. Right of passage, lodging, food, and guarantee of freedom from molestation no more than her face, her figure, and her Spanish name.

At the end of the ride a day harder than the worst of those in the saddle. There was something terrible about having brought a dying man again onto his feet. But she had not known in Denver when she turned him south that her resurrection of Pierre Challon was only for him to face another death with the news waiting for them at Trinidad.

Marc—always one buoyancy, called to mind as she needed it on the desperate ride. The bigness of his body, the clearness of his skin and its sun color. The way his hands could close irresistibly but gently as a caress. The magnificence of his hatred and the superb justice of his revenge. The pride and strength of his country and hers in his aggressive carriage. The warm flavor of his breath.

Pitifully little to know of a man, in reality. She had built more out of her imagination as she rode—things she could feel in her heart, her head—the currents and sinews of her body. None of it now left but ashes decaying in a narrow pit somewhere beneath New Mexico sod.

Pierre offered his flask again, was refused, and put it away. He disconcertingly smiled at 'Lena.

"You know, honey, it's funny about Marc and me. We got along—busy men manage that. But it was more than that. We were close—close but different. I used to wonder what the difference was."

"You know, now?"

"I think so. A woman, honey. I married her. She borned Marc. Wife to me but mother to him. That was the difference. A woman's got pride in her husband—the kind of a woman that Belle was, that you are—but she's got more than pride in her son. A husband ain't perfect. He's already built when she gets him. But a woman is kind of like God. She can create in her own image—the image in her mind—with a boy. Belle done that with Marc. Sort of took up with him where God left off with me."

"There wasn't so awful much room for improvement, Pierre," 'Lena murmured.

The old giant was silent for a while. He spoke again suddenly.

"Don't care how they got the story in Trinidad, Marc was murdered," he growled. "Perigord and Van Cleave, and the town lying back and letting them. I'm going to run that down, girl. I'm going to learn the truth and even accounts. I've made enemies in the last fifty years, but I've made friends, too. Some of them are in Range and I'm going to use them!"

'Lena said nothing. The old man's head jutted forward determinedly.

"You know a sight of folks in town, too. I could use your help."

"Not now," 'Lena said. "Maybe later. They said Hank took Marc out on the grass. I've got to find him, Pierre. There's something I never told him. He said once he had too many women. I want him to know he never had a woman—a real one—as long as he was on the XO. I want him to know he had one in the lava, even if she rode away from him the night he was killed. And I have to know Hank took good care of him. Men are clumsy about things like that and Marc would need a lot of grass over his heart, same as he used to need it under his feet."

Pierre nodded. "I'll want to talk to him, too, when I'm finished in town. Mark the place. Belle would want to be moved out there. It's where we all began. And there's got to be room enough left for me."

'Lena lowered her head in assent. Pierre leaned out the window and called up to the stage driver:

"Haul up this side of Goat Hill and let the lady out. I've got a yellow gold double-eagle in my pocket with your name on it if you've forgot she rode with us by the time you've rolled into Range."

The driver nodded agreement and Pierre leaned back beside 'Lena. "I know Hank Bayard," he went on. "He didn't ride out onto the grass just to bury Marc. He's aiming to take a swipe at whoever done Marc in. He'd be hard to find if he thought he was being looked for. Do your looking on the quiet. And tell Hank I want to see him. If you need me, I'll be at the Range Hotel—"

Chapter Thirteen

Prentice Finds Himself

PRENTICE rolled stiffly and painfully from his blankets, shivering at the bite of the morning wind whistling across the potholed, shelterless lava of the mesa rim. Al Carlin was asleep a few yards away, body relaxed, as though rough stone was a sufficient couch for any man. Hank Bayard was crouched over another of the tiny, smokeless dry piñon-twig fires above which all the indifferent cooking of this camp had been done. A kid they called Lou—a pimply, testy, foul-mouthed youngster who talked of little but women—was on lookout on a rounded crag overlooking the mesa face, a hundred yards away. The others were below somewhere, down in the hazy blue void in which lay the grass, the XO, and the New Mexico Anson had thought he had known—still untouched by the rising sun.

He moved toward Hank Bayard at the fire. When he had first come onto the XO he had thought Bayard one of the indestructibles of the country. He had been wrong. A man could not wear much thinner than Bayard was worn, now. Anson Prentice had never hated a man. He didn't hate Bayard. But he had come to find satisfaction in watching the man break down. He had come to pushing Bayard a little because he had discovered he could.

This was the kind of living Hank Bayard should know and he should have been able to take it in his stride, but he was breaking. He was breaking faster than his prisoner, yet Anson knew Marc Challon's foreman had brought every pressure to bear against that prisoner that he could find. Bayard's bitter scorn had been monumental, but the man he scorned was making a fool of him.

As Anson reached the fire, picking the matter of sleep from the corner of his eyes with a finger nail, Bayard grudgingly swung the skillet out to him. Smoking bacon lay in it; thick, whitish, lean-streaked slices, floating in half an inch of their own grease.

Anson could taste the thickness of cooling grease against the roof of his mouth—the grease of yesterday's skimpy bacon breakfast and that of the day before and other days beyond—how many of them? Ten, he thought. At least ten, with the whole party of them crouching here on the mesa rim, hiding from searchers from town and searchers from the XO, waiting to know whether Marc Challon would live or die of his wound.

Anson fished out the two slices which were his ration with his fingers. The grease was hot and burned. He shifted the bacon carefully to his other hand and quickly licked at the smarting grease. There was grime on the fingers he licked and under their nails. Water here was for drinking and little enough, even then. He licked his fingers again and suddenly laughed soft-

ly. Bayard looked quickly up at him.

"Something's so damn funny?" he snapped.

"They'll find us today," Anson said. "They'll sure as hell find us today. They were close enough when they quit, last night."

"They get any closer and you go over the edge," Bayard said raggedly. "Right down on top of them. It's a thousand feet. You'll make a splash that'll stop even Van Cleave. Now, shut up! And stay back from the rim. Any signal—"

"They don't need a signal," Anson said surely. "And nobody is putting me over the edge. That would take guts you haven't got, Hank. Marc is still alive and I might be useful to Marc. You got to know about that, first. You got to keep waiting."

Bayard swore with a sullen, bearlike shake of his head and made a threatening swipe with the skillet. Anson moved away from him, chewing on a limp strip of bacon. When a man got this hungry—not the full gripe of starvation but a savage awareness of long having been only half-fed—even the taste of his own saliva was good. Bayard couldn't hang on up here much longer, even if the camp remained undiscovered. Bayard and the others had to be getting hungry, too.

The bacon gone, Prentice shoved his hands deep into his pockets for warmth. Finding an eddy in the wind after a little search among the potholes, he hunkered down close to the rock to let the warming sun strike his back. This was instinctive and it startled him that he had learned how to do it. There was so damned little he had learned in this country. So very damned little.

Carlin had awakened and was moving out toward the rock from which watch was usually kept. Relieved, the kid called Lou was in and on his knees beside Bayard's tiny fire, trying to thaw out the chill driven into him by the dawn wind. None of the three were watching their prisoner.

Prentice eyed the only shelter in the camp—the crudely improvised brush lean-to in which Marc Challon lay—and he speculated on his chances of reaching it. They were better today, he thought, than they had been yesterday. And yesterday had been better than the day before. Today he might make it.

It was not so hard to look back on, now, although it had been intolerable the first two days. Two days in which the thickening stain on the blanket under Challon's body had continued to grow and the best man in the crew stared helplessly at the ugly blueness of Challon's slowly-welling wound.

The bitterness in this crew of Challon's had been at Hugh Perigord and Van Cleave, but they could do nothing toward either until they were sure one way or another that there was no risk Challon would again fall into the hands of the men who had tried to kill him. Still, Bayard and Carlin and the rest could not wholly contain their bitterness and Prentice was at hand in their camp.

In the first hour here on the mesa rim after the incredible ride out from town, Bayard and the others had learned that their prisoner knew nothing of the stupid but singularly effective trap into which Marc Challon had walked. His own shock and evident aversion when he learned the truth of what had happened in town had cleared Anson of complicity in it. But still there had to be an outlet for the im-

potent anger in the others.

These men of the saddle had beaten him for buying Marcy Challon. They had kicked him for buying the XO, knowing well enough that Challon had been content to let the ranch go. They had roughed him from one to another and back again until their unsqueamish bellies were full and a coroner would have as readily chosen him as Challon to work upon.

His bruised and swollen groins and buttocks had made walking impossible for two days. These men had known how to punish. Breathing was still occasionally sharply uncomfortable, reminding him of boots driven against his ribs when he lay sobbing on the ground. Curious that he should remember the sobbing when the hurt was nearly gone—that the sobbing should stir his anger when thought of the boots no longer did so.

The lengthening stubble on his cheeks and about his mouth hid drying scars and his tongue was already accustomed to the gap where two teeth had been. Frightened men were savage and these had been frightened men. They had been afraid Marc Challon might die.

Afterward, by some common accord, they had kept their hands from him. Except that he knew his own cowardice, Anson would have believed after those first few hours that he had survived a trial which had won him the grudging admiration of those who had mauled him.

But they had not let him see Challon. They had not let him add his efforts and hopes to their clumsy ones. Their world had only a wrong and a right where two men and a woman were involved. There was no room in it for a fool who had taken too long to see the enormity of his mistake. They could not understand that although Anson Prentice owed the man nothing approaching the staggering fixity of their own loyalty, he, also, desperately wanted Challon to live.

Al Carlin had vanished into the scant, shallow shelter of some pothole on the lookout rock. Lou and Hank, at the fire, were mixed in one of the heated, meaningless quarrels over nothing which often flared briefly among men too long together under pressure and strain. The sun was higher and the air warmer. The blue night haze was lifting from the grass, far below. Prentice rose stiffly to his feet and crossed to the open face of Challon's shelter. His movement was not seen.

Two or three days before, when the wind was right, Anson had caught a strong odor of putrescence from Challon's shelter. He had thought then that the injured man could not long survive such an atmosphere, let alone the decay feeding on his body. Ducking under the low brush roof, he caught the odor again, fainter but unmistakable.

He would not have known Challon. The man's face had been craggy, supported by a plaited underlay of muscle which had set hard lines and strong, flat planes between the features in repose and provided a curious, fierce mobility under duress. The face he now saw, fevered and with the jaw sagging in exhaustion, had something of beauty of which he had not before been aware. The underflesh was gone and the skin drawn taut. The beauty was in the proportion and modeling of the bones now so evident. He saw Marc Challon had been a handsome boy.

Squatting on his heels, aware of the flies still too chilled to be stirring and

so clinging to the powdery leaves of the crude roof thatch, Anson ran back in his mind over the smattering of theory and science with which even a moderately conscientious student involuntarily emerged from a big university. Not medicine, as such, but half-forgotten shadows cast by study of allied sciences into the medical field.

Bayard and the others, within the limits of their knowledge and the materials at hand, had provided homeopathy, at least. Whisky—empty bottles were about—consumed by patient and ministers with about equal effect. A tumble of brass shell cases from which the charges had been painstakingly emptied. Anson shivered. He had heard of this cautery and credited it as an old wives' tale, yet here was evidence of its use. Gunpowder poured onto torn flesh and ignited there to seal off bleeding and discourage infection.

There were quantities of used bandaging in one corner, appallingly stained. Shirts, underwear, even blanketing when the supply of fabric apparently ran low in the camp. It seemed incredible that a man could have lived through this, but Challon was alive. His breathing was steady and strong, but markedly labored. And the heat of his fevered body seemed to warm the interior of the shelter to oppressiveness.

Anson reached for Challon's arm, remembering to set the balls of his fingers against the underside of the wrist, rather than his thumb, but he could not recall the proper pulse rate if he had ever known it and his watch had been broken during his first night here, so that he couldn't measure time. Challon lay on his side. It was not difficult to raise his dark, stiffened shirt and slip the shoddy knots of his bandages. However, the cloth stuck and would not come free. Anson explored under the edges, finding red, angry flesh, hard to his touch as though callused. The hardness of interior pressure.

Rocking back, he tried to remember what this meant, but could not. Such of the wound as he could expose resembled a huge pustule, ripe enough to be opened. But a bullet hole was not a boil. There seemed little which could be done except remove the filthy, adhering bandage. Anson was working gently with this when Challon suddenly broke the deep, labored rhythm of his breathing and turned partially away from him.

Something broke with the movement. The bandage came away. And with it came a great, deep core of mortification. The bullet, which had most certainly been so deep as to avoid any but the most skillful probing, lay where Anson could lift it clear with his fingers without touching flesh.

Challon's wound was no less staggering in size, but now the pressure was gone from it. Prentice thought with elation that if the man had lived for ten days with this slough in him, he was bound to recover, now that the wound was clean.

A limp evidence of habitual fastidiousness, Prentice had in one hip pocket a folded, unused square of linen handkerchief, from which the starch and freshness were long gone, but which offered the closest approach to cleanliness he could find. He packed this over the open wound and had just bound it in place with strips torn from the cleanest edge of the blanket under Challon when Hank Bayard ducked angrily under the open side of the shelter and slammed a half-opened

hand at him.

The blow caught Prentice across his ear, spilling him onto his hands and knees. Bayard caught his collar and dragged him outside. Anson twisted free and scrambled to his feet.

"What the hell you doing?" Bayard demanded unsteadily.

Prentice pulled at his banged ear. "Cleaning up the mess you made of him," he said, jerking his head toward the shelter.

Shaking and livid, Bayard caught his arm. "I told you to stay away from him!"

The range man's hand slammed across Anson's face with loose, biting knuckles again, re-opening a half-healed cut in his lip. He tasted blood and something else. Something which surged up out of a dry well within him.

"Damn you, Bayard!" he said distinctly. And he hit Challon's foreman.

Maybe it was a clumsy blow. He didn't know. But it gave him the same kind of release that removing the crusted bandage and its load of rot had given Marc Challon's body. He had an instant's awareness of relief and inward cleanliness. Then Bayard came in with a crouching cat's bounce, his gun high. The barrel chopped downward and the sun collided with Prentice's head.

Prentice roused to strong midmorning sun in his face and the stiffness of clotted blood in his hair. Heat rose visibly from the dark rock about him. He raised himself unsteadily to his elbows, then to a sitting position, cradling his head with his hands.

The rim of the mesa was before him—beyond, a blue void of space. Bounding it on the far side was the truncated cone of the volcano, flanked a little farther to the south by the spire of Tinaja. Orientation was an effort which made him wince.

All of the old XO crew was now gathered here on the rock. Those who had been long out watching the parties searching for them had come in. And their horses had not been left as before, farther back on the mesa crown where timber would screen them from discovery. The smell of good cooked meat was in the air. Bayard's usual cautious fire had been supplanted by a huge one which sent a tall, careless column of smoke into the air. And the crew was eating. Prentice saw a young steer had been hazed in from the timber grass and killed and butchered.

Searching for the roots of this sudden change in the mood of the camp, he had a bad moment of fear that he had done Marc Challon a final violence in changing the dressing on his wound. Then he saw Hank Bayard straighten as he came out of Challon's shelter and the former XO foreman was again the man he had been the first time Prentice had seen him. Bayard was laughing. Challon was all right.

Puzzled, Anson rose unsteadily to his feet, found his hat and replaced it, and started for the shelter. He was yards short of this when the cause of the change in the camp materialized in Challon's doorway. A woman. A girl. In this first instant, guided chiefly by dress and manner, a Mexican girl. One of a kind apparent along every street and nearly every roadway south of the Arkansas. Then Anson saw her face.

Radiance was short of the rapture shining in it—the eagerness and tremendous joy and relief apparent in every excited move of her body. He could not tell whether she might be

beautiful in repose, but there was a beauty in her now which he had never seen equalled.

He was completely baffled for a moment. Then he remembered that Marcy had told him with unconsciously bitter amusement of a cheap little Mexican saloon wench Marc Challon had taken out onto the lava with him.

"Marc's a fool," Marcy had said. "He thinks I cost him something! Maybe I did, but he got something in return besides a bad smell and disease. I hope this one fixes him right!"

Prentice saw this again had been one of Marcy's dark visions. This was no saloon girl. The look of freshness was about her and the smell of freshness would be about her, too. And there could be no disease in a body with so light a heart.

Looking at the girl, Anson felt weary, diseased, himself, and as alone as he had ever been since his mother's death. The girl had thought Challon dead. He was alive and her rapture was over this. Anson wondered if something like this hadn't been what he had wanted from Marcy—at least there was no mockery in it.

The girl stopped him a rod from Challon's shelter.

"I want to see Marc," he told her.

"Why?" she asked.

Startled, Prentice tried to reach an answer out of his still ringing head. To his surprise, he could find none which would be valid to either the girl or himself.

"Marc has already told Hank to give you a horse and start you down the mesa," the girl went on. "You'd better go."

Prentice knew he had lain a pair of hours untended in the sun with his scalp split open. Granted her attention was all for Challon, surely this girl must have known where he lay and why, and that he was hurt. But she hadn't come near him and she had sent no one. There was hard and uncompromising unfriendliness in her eyes, now. Not enmity; not accusation; only disapproval and dismissal. Marcy had said she was a saloon girl, but Anson Prentice was beyond her pale.

"Marc doesn't want to see me?" he asked unsteadily.

She smiled without humor. "You can't be that big a fool!" she told him.

Prentice fingered the dried split in his scalp and replaced his hat. He was thinking far, far ahead.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know. Hank's got a horse for me?"

The girl nodded. Prentice started to turn away, then swung back.

"I thought Marc was the fool," he said softly. "I really did. A damned poor trader. I was crazy, I guess. Crazy as the devil, Miss. I didn't know about you."

The girl's eyes warmed a little. "Neither did Marc," she murmured. "Not then." Her voice strengthened. "Why don't you get out of New Mexico before you're really hurt?"

"I don't know that, either," Anson said with complete honesty. "Be damned if I do!"

There was nothing more to be said. There was no way to explain the feeling in him that if he could see Marc Challon—that if Marc would see him—somehow Challon would know the bad days were past. Maybe even that Challon would understand he had known almost as little of Anson Prentice as Prentice had known of Challon's side the day they had all sat in the XO office, putting their cards down for each of the others to see.

Prentice turned away and approached Bayard at the fire. The smell of food made him uncomfortable and more aware of the lingering pain in his head, but he asked for none of the meal the others were so ravenously enjoying.

"You've got a horse for me?"

Challon's foreman nodded toward the bunched animals. "Saddled and waiting."

Anson saw among the others the short-coupled bay he had ridden from the XO into Range and from Range here to the summit of Boundary Mesa. Bayard fell in beside him as they crossed to the animal. Without real purpose except to cover his own uncertainty, Prentice tested the saddle girth.

"You thought Van Cleave would find us today," Bayard reminded him. "I wish I had busted your damned head in!"

"You tried. Maybe I half wish you had. What happened to Van Cleave?"

"Nothing—yet!" Bayard said with a wicked grin. "But his pay is on the way. And Perigord's. Hugh's got to climb back into the traces and that means he's hauling against Van Cleave instead of with him from here on out. 'Lena brought us near as good news as we had waiting for her here. The Old Man is back. She brought him down from Denver. Pierre's in Range and pawing dust. I know him. Van Cleave and Perigord are both going to have to walk the top strand of the wire now or they'll have the whole county on their necks. You'll see. Now, how about getting to hell off this mesa? We could do with some clean air up here!"

Prentice pulled himself into the saddle, wondering if an old man could be the equal of the ambitions and combined malices of Hugh Perigord, Van Cleave, and the woman to whom he was now himself returning. He didn't think so, but he knew Hank Bayard would not listen to him.

Chapter Fourteen

"I Want This Ranch!"

ANSON PRENTICE had never been able to grasp the method by which people of this grass found their way so readily from one place to another. There were plenty of landmarks—the mesas, themselves; Tinaja and the cone of the volcano; the ever-present, white-capped horizon line of the mountains to the west—but intervening distances were so great that the slightest inaccuracy in bearing multiplied itself in an hour or two to a huge error.

He experienced this difficulty working out a way down from the cap of Boundary Mesa. It was, he supposed, no more than fifteen miles in the saddle from Bayard's camp to the home buildings of the XO. Three hours at the outside, allowing for the steepness of the first part of the descent. But at noon he was still threading the long, slanting ridges, the deep-cut arroyos, and the tumbled lava ruin which formed the talus footing the mesa.

His horse sweat with the dogged pace to which he held it and the afternoon died overhead before he finally reached a low promontory, an XO fence, and a view of the home buildings. There were lamps already alight in the big house when he found a gate in the fence and passed through it

with his usual difficulty in refastening the hooped wire barrier.

A number of horses were saddled at the corral rail, but they were dry, their coats free of dust, and he thought none of them had been ridden during the day. Two or three of Van Cleave's men were in the yard. One of these took his horse when he swung down in front of the corral gate.

The rider eyed Anson, taking in his beard, the thinness of his face, the limpness of clothing worn ten days without removal, but he said nothing. Tom Halliard, again in boots and saddle clothes, his face more supported than bandaged by the swath of cloth encircling it from under his chin to the crown of his head, was sitting slump-shouldered on a bench outside the bunkhouse. He looked up but also said nothing as Prentice passed him.

With weariness something he carried like a burden across his shoulders, Anson angled on across the yard to the back door of the main house. Van Cleave was smoking at a table in the kitchen. His boots and shirt were off. He looked as if he might have shaved half an hour before and not re-dressed. He looked comfortable. He looked at home.

"Turned you loose, eh?" Van Cleave asked. "Bayard must be pretty sure of himself, now the Old Man's back in town!"

"I could have escaped from Bayard," Anson suggested.

Van Cleave grinned. "Anybody else, maybe; not you. Perigord was here about noon. He said Hank would turn you loose with Pierre Challon back in Range to stiffen his back. I been waiting to see if Hugh was right."

"Funny," Anson said shortly. "I had a notion maybe the sheriff was out here looking for the gang that held up the Santa Fe pay train and the bank in town. He ought to have been smart enough to come to the right place the first time." News had reached the men hiding out on the mesa that the bank in Range had been hit.

"Word gets around, don't it?" Van Cleave asked easily. "Prentice, you got a dirty mind! Sit down. Marcy's dressing."

"Supposing you dress and get out of here!" Anson suggested, anger beginning to pulse in him like liquid over steam. This was going to be the last time he came home to this house and he wanted a different reception.

Van Cleave agreeably drew on his boots, stamping each foot sharply against the floor to set the leather, and stood up.

"Why don't we understand each other, right now?" he asked pleasantly. "You want something on this ranch. So do I. Two different things. But we're both here and we're going to have to make a trade. I'm going to get what I want. If I don't, I'm going to have to take what you think you've got. I can do it. I know. I've had ten days to find that out in."

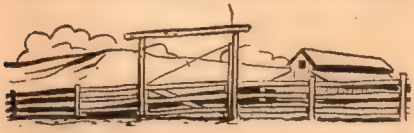
"Marcy?" Prentice breathed softly.

"Is there anything else you want here?"

Prentice stared at Van Cleave's torso, in half-sleeved gray underwear with a row of stamped ivory buttons, each bearing the initials of a trademark. He had been camped halfway to the sky with a different kind of man from this for the last ten days. A kind which worked in the sun and was colored by it. A kind with ridged biceps and a deep chest. A bigger kind than this, inside and out. Yet there was something repellently beautiful in the

slender perfection of Van Cleave's body and the chalk-whiteness of the skin of his upper arms and hairless chest. This man didn't take his shirt off in the sun, only within the shelter of a house. And he bred fear where another might have bred respect. Anson felt sorry for Marcy. Her attack was also her defense. She had no other weapon.

Turning, he walked wordlessly out of the room, leaving Van Cleave grinning imperturbably beside the table.



A man long drunk would feel like this on his first sober day. A certainty of wrongness inside, at first; self-condemnation for an obvious excess which had not been at all apparent during its commission. The old saying that no man knew he was drunk till he could see the bottom of the bottle. This was the bottom, now; these were the dregs. Their taste was in Prentice's mouth. His tongue was thick with it. And the whole machine of his thinking was churning against the poison he had poured into it.

It was easy for a man to quit the bottle when he was prostrate with the after-nausea of a bout. Prentice wondered if it would be like this with Marcy. He hoped not. He wanted a cleaner break than that.

She came out into the main hall of the house when he was half along it on the way to the living-room. She was in a fresh dress with the top starched and her hair newly brushed. The light of the wall lamp between them was good to her. It was not hard to read motives he wanted into her flooding relief when she saw him. For a moment it was easy to believe that here was exactly what he had hoped to have in this house when Marcy told him she was willing to divorce her husband.

Then she was running toward him and her relief was all too plainly from personal desperation, rather than from a concern for him. The lamplight was in sharper focus on the lines about her eyes and mouth.

Marc Challon was on the mesas, recovering from a shot in the back and nursed by a woman who loved him. Old Pierre was in Range, urging the people of his county to indict a man and a woman who had walked impatiently through barriers they all honored. Cy Van Cleave was in the kitchen of the Challon house, counting stolen money in his mind and calculating how little of it he would have to use to take the XO over from the two who now controlled it. In Range, Hugh Perigord was polishing his star assiduously, measuring two titans against one another in order to choose the stronger for his own support—a railroad and an old rancher now without land. Tom Halliard had no face. Jim Pozner and the Hyatt brothers—men from Van Cleave's crew and Challon's—were dead. There would be other wounds. And one man had the fuse to all this in his hands, to snuff it out or fan it to more furious burning. It was curious when and where a man could feel strength and the sharpness of the cleavage which could occasionally develop between the right and the wrong.

"Anson!" Marcy cried as she ran against Prentice. "Anson, I've been half crazy!"

"I'm hungry," Prentice said.

"You poor dear, you look it!" Marcy told him, backing a little away. Her

lips smiled in tenderness but her eyes were restless with speculation. So much could have happened in ten days. "Sit down," she rushed on. "I'll bring you something. Kick out of your boots. Maybe you'd like a bath and your pajamas, first. You look done in."

"I'm hungry," Prentice said again.

Marcy half pushed him into a deep living-room chair and ran down the hall toward the back of the house. He heard her speak there and knew that Van Cleave was still in the kitchen. Her voice rose in pitch and he could feel the tension of an argument, if he could not hear the words. As Marcy neared the door, returning, one phrase was distinguishable:

"Not tonight—!"

It could mean so many things. Prentice sighed heavily. Wisdom was hard come by. But when a man knew an answer, decision was ridiculously simple.

Marcy came back into the living-room. She brought him the coffee pot with no mug in which to drink the half-warmed stuff and two slabs of bread concealing a slab of meat, the lot having been cut so hurriedly and under such duress that no ordinary jaws could have attacked its uneven thickness. Prentice put the sandwich down on the arm of his chair.

"I'm going out to Trinidad in the morning, Marcy," he said.

Obviously startled, she was a moment regaining control of herself.

"Business?" she asked guardedly.

"Business. Yes."

"Alone? You don't want me to go with you?"

"No."

Silence for a moment, then more quietly:

"How long will you be gone?"

"I'm not coming back."

Prentice was forced to admire again the hard rock ribbing of her nature. There was now none of the false hysteria with which she had greeted him. She turned her back and walked to the fireplace, her mind, like a man's, functioning best in a difficult moment while she was in motion. Before the mantel she turned.

"I hate a coward," she said.

"Meaning me?"

"Anson, you're exhausted. You must have been through hell. We both have. Tomorrow—"

"No, Marcy."

Her jaws clamped shut, then. She re-crossed to him and stood looking down.

"Try to leave the XO in the morning and you'll find out just how much I hate you," she said quietly. "How much I've hated you since the instant you first touched me!"

"There's more than just the two of us involved," Prentice said patiently. "There's the ranch. We'll have to talk about that."

"What are you afraid of that's making you quit? Me?"

Prentice didn't have to lie. "No."

"The country—the people?" Marcy went on with a tight smile. "Listen! No young couple off of the grass ever got married because they were in love and spring was in the air, but because they had to. No baby was ever born down here but calendars in every kitchen and pool hall and store got marked back to see if a preacher got the parents married in time. No woman ever went north to Denver or east to Kansas City or even across the pass to Trinidad for medical attention without the grass making its own diagnosis! You actually give a damn what

people who think like that think of you, Anson?"

Prentice thought of Stuart, the Range banker, of Treadwell, of Hank Bayard. He thought of Marc Challon and Challon's father and the dark-skinned girl out on the mesa with Marc now. Marcy's accusations against the people of this country were not just. Not against such individuals as these.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Yes, I'm afraid I do."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Marcy demanded. "We can make them crawl. We could have done it already, but being married would have made it easier. We're the XO Ranch. We're as big as the Challons ever were, and for the same reason that they were big. These people down here are a funny kind, sort of bullying in their thinking. If we hide, they talk. But come out flat in the open and make them like it and they will. It's their way.

"We'll have us a party here at the house, a big one. They'll all have to come. The XO puts bread onto too many of their tables, one way or another. And they won't talk, after that. Not after they've seen your ring on my finger!"

"Not my ring, Marcy."

She clamped her hands until the knuckles whitened and strode once more to the mantel and back.

"You're afraid of Van Cleave!" she charged.

"I'm afraid of what we've done to Marc Challon and his father and Hank Bayard and the rest of the XO people. I'm afraid of what we've done to the ranch and Range and the whole Territory. I didn't know in the beginning how big a ranch like this was—that it was something which belonged to more than the Challons, alone."

"Ahhh!" Marcy said. Prentice thought she would spit but she did not.

"I'm afraid of what we've done to ourselves, Marcy. I thought I loved you. I think I tried hard to love you. But there's nothing—"

"You should have seen me when I was eighteen," Marcy cut in harshly. "You should have seen the kind of life facing me then. I've done a lot in the last ten years, but I'm ashamed of none of it. And I know as well as you do that love is for kids. You're dodging. You're afraid of Van Cleave."

Prentice made no answer. Marcy's lips twisted bitterly, but the edge of the blade was still toward Prentice, not herself.

"You needn't be, Anson," she murmured. "I've taken care of him."

"I'm afraid I don't envy the man."

She struck him, then. Not a woman's tolerated prerogative of a quick, wiping slap when words failed. This was the hard blow of a balled fist, with deep malice behind it. And it hurt. He reached for his kerchief, belatedly remembered he had used it to dress Challon's wound, and swabbed at his lips with his dusty sleeve.

"We'd better talk about the XO, Marcy," he said quietly again.

The lamp over the desk he had been occasionally using in the store was smoking heavily but Prentice didn't trouble to trim it, once it was alight. He wouldn't need it that long. He brushed aside the accumulation of figures which represented his work on the store accounts. They had no value now, either to the ranch or to himself as evidence of industry to offer his

father.

Drawing out an envelope, he addressed it to Jason Prentice, care of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, Trinidad, Colorado. He thought the mails as good a way as any to let his father know what had happened here. He wrote a terse note with the very bad pen on the desk. Folding this, he slid it into the envelope with the document he had earlier written in the house, subsequently signed by Marcy and witnessed by the yard boy then cleaning up in the kitchen. It was curious that the boy's signature should have been more graceful and legible than Marcy's—*Paco Encelador.*

Sealing the envelope, Prentice dropped it into the metal slot in the top of a locked mail sack hanging on a peg on the wall—a mail sack stenciled with its point of origin: *Challon, New Mexico Territory, U.S.A.* It would be riding the candy-wagon to Range before breakfast in the morning. This done, Prentice returned to the desk, lighted another of his eternally unsatisfactory wheat-straw cigarettes and stared at the smoky lamp.

In a way he had offered Marcy a fair enough deal. So fair it was doubtful Jason Prentice would ever tolerate his son again—unless the old man could be shown that by quitting now Anson had affected the course and ownership of the XO and inevitably the mood of the whole country about Range to a degree which would benefit the Santa Fe when it built across this grass. The old man might not figure the price too high for this in the long run.

Marcy had been a good trader, even in this last hand. When she realized that he was himself no longer any part of the consideration and that it was beyond her power to make him so, she had listened to his offer. She had a full third interest in the XO, transferred to her by Challon in the beginning. Anson himself had another third as forfeiture on the loan he had made Challon. And he had bought the remaining third at the time of their settlement.

It had been plain that with wider and brighter dreams now dead, Marcy would not relinquish her share of the ranch. Perhaps out of her own desperation; perhaps because of Van Cleave. Prentice had not known and he didn't want to know. But he couldn't give Marcy his two-thirds, outright. Some pride remained and it over-rode his impatience to be done with the dealing.

The measure of that pride was the figure he had asked—a demand note for fifty thousand dollars. A total salvage of less than his original loan and actually a total loss, since he would never enforce its collection. But it was an anchor to hold Marcy in place, to insure that she never crossed his path again. And the note was something to show his father. To have come out of this with at least something on paper might mollify Jason Prentice.

Marcy had signed—sullenly—but she had signed, already doubtless planning feverishly at a new tangent. Her carriage was not Marcy's only feline attribute. She had a way of landing always with her feet under her. Her pyramid was reversed, now. She didn't know that Marc Challon was not dead, but in Challon's good time she would find it out. And Cy Van Cleave, who had been merely a buttress she had flanked in against her original scheme for additional support, now became the focal point on which the whole structure precariously balanced.

When Challon was once more on his feet he would turn again to the task

of repossessing his ranch. This was certain. The XO was in his blood as it was in his father's. And Marcy had her limitations. She could hold the ranch against the Challons only as long as she had Van Cleave. Anson had told her he didn't envy the thin, soft-voiced little man from Mora. He could have gone farther. He didn't envy Marcy, either.

When his cigarette had burned his fingers and spilled its fire on the floor at his resultant start, Prentice rose and snuffed the lamp with a gusty breath across its chimney. There was still much to be done, but he would not do it. A talk with Perigord in town about such facts as he knew concerning Van Cleave's part in the holdup in the pass. Mention of Van Cleave's evasive answer to his direct charge the XO foreman had a part in the more recent robbery of Stuart's bank. A threat to relay this information to his father and the Santa Fe, thereby almost certainly forcing Perigord's hand. A few minutes with Old Man Challon to tell him Marc was alive and recuperating on the mesa.

He was really too tired to ride farther tonight, but things were finished here. He would go on to Range, but he would speak to no one there. This was the measure of his cowardice. It was not as large here at the end as he had been afraid it might be, riding down from the mesa in today's noon sun.

Van Cleave was leaning against the corral rails when Prentice crossed over from the store. No others of the crew were visible in the yard. The bunkhouse windows were dimly alight, but the main house now wholly dark. Prentice passed Van Cleave without greeting and went into the barn, heading for the saddle rack. Van Cleave followed him in, pulling the big door shut.

Prentice put his back to the rack and waited for the other to come up. The restless sound of the animals in the big building was about him. The sweet smell of meadow-cured hay. Old harness and riding-leather. And the dung-littered straw underfoot.

"Riding?" Van Cleave asked.

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"You said there were two things on the ranch a while ago. They're both yours, now."

"So you quit!" Van Cleave breathed. "Curled up your toes. Riding out all clean-shanked and to hell with the rest of us. Giving her the whole thing without even letting me have a chance to bid for your share in this place—and you knowing I want this ranch like you've never wanted anything in all of your damned fat-bellied life!"

"Make your bid to Marcy."

"I will," Van Cleave agreed. "I'll make even a cleaner deal with her than I could have with you, before I'm through. But there's something else. I've had a few men spill from their saddles when they were riding with me. Enough of them to be used to it. But I've stuck to an old rule of mine; I've never left any of them in shape to talk about me behind my back after I've moved on!"

Van Cleave had come very close to Prentice in the darkness. Anson could hear the quick, light tempo of his breathing.

"Leave me alone," he said.

"There was Ben, dying over there in the store before I could get back to take care of him."

"Leave me alone," Prentice said again.

"You got into Ben's pockets and

found some money. You wanted to talk about that in town, once. You might want to try again."

"It'll be dawn before I'm in town, now," Prentice said rapidly, hearing his own voice with a peculiar detachment. A voice warped upward in pitch. It was hot in the barn with the door closed. He was sweating. "I'm catching the daylight stage to Trinidad. I'm not talking to anybody!"

"No," Van Cleave agreed. "When the buzzards start to swing, somebody's going to find you out somewhere between here and wherever Bayard's been hiding on the mesas."

"My God, leave me alone!"

Prentice's voice was an entity of its own, now, disembodied and beyond volition, shaming him with its thinness.

"It'll look like you escaped Bayard," Van Cleave went on steadily. "It'll look like one of his boys trailed you and got you. There isn't a man on the XO tonight who'd dare admit you been here, after I pass the word."

"No, man, listen! This is something you ought to know. Challon isn't dead. He's alive—alive, I tell you!"

His answer was a soft, almost caressing metallic click. The hard muzzle of a gun rammed an inch into his belly. It was then that he realized his voice was still in his own throat—that he could speak with it—that he had to.

"For the love of God, don't do it!" he screamed.

The gun grunted, making no louder sound because its muzzle was imbedded in the soft flesh above his belt. A harsh violence and an exquisite agony flung Prentice up against the saddle rack on the points of his toes. He caught one of the pegs and hung by it as rigidity rushed from his body through a great hole where his bowels had been.

"Marcy," he said very distinctly. "Marcy, help me—"

The peg in his hands broke and he fell heavily. His face struck a hard boot toe which was hastily withdrawn. There was a rushing wind of compelling violence and no hurt. As from a great distance and rapidly receding further, he heard Van Cleave's voice:

"God Almighty—!"

And he found comfort in the lifting wind. Here at last was something of which he was wholly unafraid.

Chapter Fifteen

A Woman's Wisdom

BLANKET-WRAPPED, Challon rode Tia Pozner's buckboard. 'Lena was driving and Pierre flanked them, astride a lava bronc two hands too short for his great frame and twice too ornery for a man his age. Challon was warm in the sun and, he thought, farther along toward complete recovery than the others would admit. The heavy burdens of the first conscious days of convalescence had lifted and a familiar restlessness was in him. It seemed incredible now that there had been days in which he would have let the accomplishments of two lifetimes slip through his fingers as unprotestingly as life had nearly slipped through them—that he had been so sick it had been easier to consider a whole new beginning than to face settlement of the hand he had sat down to play out with Marcy.

He glanced at the girl beside him. He thought she had not been disturbed

by his switch to surrender and back to hostility again. The physical was a strong current in 'Lena and she would have understood his passiveness had been only weakness of his shattered body. But Pierre and Bayard had been disturbed. This drive was a result of their uneasiness, arranged in murmured parleys in Tia Pozner's front room when it was thought Challon slept. Part of some scheme they had rigged. Hank and the rest were waiting somewhere up ahead and Challon knew he would have to be surprised as hell.

With Pierre riding and grinning like a kid beside them, 'Lena pulled up out of the arroyo, they had been following and crested a low rise. Below, on a flat patch of grass, apparently relishing attention after so much neglect, were the whitefaces Challon had excepted from the XO herds. Brush-burned and scarred some, they hadn't fared badly for having been long scattered. The herd was apparently intact and the same potential wealth it had been on XO meadows. Hank jogged proudly up.

"This is something, Hank!" Challon told him. "Really something! Get a full tally?"

"To the last head," Hank agreed. "If I never believed in Challon luck before, I do now. Pierre, what'd this bunch be worth on the rails at Trinidad?"

Pierre considered elaborately, as though this had not all been carefully rehearsed. "Eight hundred a head. Eighty thousand for the lot. And all of them toughened enough for a drive across the mesas, too!"

"Eighty thousand is a sight of money," Hank murmured.

"With Marc's deposits in Range it'd buy a lot of land," Pierre agreed.

Hank swung on Challon. "A woman really wanting fancy living's got no use for a ranch, really. Money'd suit her better. And an outlander with a yellow belly can't be too hard to buy off. We all got to get back onto the XO, Marc. We been fools long enough. Throw in this stock and what cash you got in the bank and let me try to make you a deal for the ranch—now, boy!"

Challon looked at his father. "There's a million-dollars potential in that bunch of bulls and you know it, Pierre! Now, listen, both of you. The stock stays here and the money stays in the bank. You ought to understand, Pierre, even if Hank doesn't. This is our country—your country. It works slow but it does a permanent job. I told Marcy this country would break her. She's going to see what I meant. I can wait that long."

Pierre's face darkened. "By hell, I can't!" he choked. Reining about, he rode off at a high-headed, stiff-legged lope. Bayard followed him. 'Lena snapped her reins.

"It was foolish. If Pierre had a bullet in his back he wouldn't expect decision from you so soon."

"Pierre's an old man," Challon grumbled. "I forget it, but so does he! There's going to be a hole in the sky when he's gone, for sure. Waiting's hard for him, maybe because he's short of time. But this is my game!"

"Not altogether, Marc," 'Lena corrected quietly. "Won't you ever understand? It affects us all—everyone in Red River County. Pierre may be wrong, but he could be right, too."

Halfway back to Pozner's they sighted a green livery wagon from Range, rented out and traveling in the opposite direction along a parallel

ridge. It had obviously touched at Tia's. Challon frowned, unable to identify the driver. 'Lena seemed to share his uneasiness, rolling the buckboard more swiftly. Both of them eased to see Tia looking out at them from her doorway as they rolled into the yard. She crossed swiftly to them.

"Did you see him—the sheriff—Hugh Perigord?" she asked. "He was here."

"What did he want, Tia?"

"The *cabron* killed my Jaime. Could I talk to him? I don't know what he wanted. I hid until he was gone."

"If he'd wanted much, he'd have stayed around," Challon told her. "Don't worry."

Tia seemed relieved. As they entered the house she picked up Jim Pozner's shotgun from behind the door and returned it to its usual place in the kitchen. 'Lena and Challon exchanged half-amused glances and dropped onto a settee. Challon raised his good arm and the girl slid beneath it. Tia reappeared in the kitchen doorway, saw them, and backed from sight. The outer door closed behind her. Spanish courtesy. She knew privacy could not belong to more than two.

Challon was aware of the warmth of 'Lena's body beside him, but it was her silence he relished most. Few women were born with an ability to hold silence and use it. His hand moved along the roundness of her ribs. Her head tilted back. Her lips smiled at him, a little parted and softer than those which had always masked Marcy. Challon bent to a kiss like others he had known, yet wholly different, at once gentle and immensely urgent. A small foreign fear touched him. Here was a need he had never known, a closeness of approach no living soul had ever achieved. This woman was of the same dust as himself.

'Lena presently broke the silence, freeing his good hand to hold it between her own. Challon breathed deeply. As with silence, there were times for words.

"So much has happened—so little chance for talk," he said. "Never about us. What we'd do and when. You've never asked."

"When could I have asked?" 'Lena answered. "Why should I, anyway? I know the answer."

Challon's eyes widened in surprise. She laughed softly.

"Do you think you're the only person in New Mexico with enough patience to get exactly what he wants in exactly the way he wants it, Marc Challon? Of course I know. I've had a long time to make sure."

Challon had questions of his own, then, but Hank and Pierre entered the house unceremoniously. Grim men with fresh news burdening them.

"Marc, you see that wagon on the ridge?" Pierre asked abruptly. "It was Hugh Perigord. He's got young Prentice's body under a tarp in back. Found him in the brush, gut-shot and dead a week. And the lid's off in town!"

Challon found acceptance of Anson Prentice's death easy enough after the first moment. He had thought odds that Prentice would survive this small from the beginning. Marcy, yes—but not Prentice.

"What's happened in town, Pierre?" he asked quietly.

"First off, Marcy's recorded deeds to the XO from young Prentice to her—what she's been shooting for from the beginning, I reckon. Lord knows how she got them, but she was almost too slow. Jason Prentice hit town right behind her with a demand note for a lot

of iron, secured by the ranch, signed by her to his son. Signature and witness too good for the county clerk to refuse, too. Hell of a situation!"

"Sounds like all the hell in Range belongs to Marcy," Challon said. "That's what I've been waiting for. Hugh came here hunting for you, didn't he? Why—what for?"

"When a man's shirt's caught on bobwire or a rattler's hanging by its fangs from his backside, what's he always done in this country? Come running to the XO. Only you're supposed to be dead and I wasn't on the XO today, so Hugh had to come running out here. Hard for him to swallow, maybe, but he was hunting help."

"Always figured Hugh could handle most things alone," Challon said.

"If they didn't all come at once he might," Pierre agreed. "But not this. Jason Prentice wants his son found. Van Cleave, who killed him, don't. Hugh's got that straight. Paco Enceladador, the Mexican kid that's been yard-hustling at the ranch, got enough of Van Cleave and had guts enough to sneak in to Hugh in town with the truth on what's been going on out there. Van Cleave got the Santa Fe pay roll, all right, and bled the bank in town a few nights back, too. Add that to the rest of it—Marcy pushed us off the ranch to have it herself. Old man Prentice has got a note against it she can't pay, and with his son dead, he'll dump it even quicker than he aims to, now. Van Cleave's got some working cash he apparently figures on doing something with. Hugh's got young Prentice's body and knows who killed him. The old man will want to see rope stretched for that and Van Cleave sure as hell won't want to hang. I reckon Hugh needs help, all right!"

Challon thought of the calculating impersonality with which the sheriff of Red River County had drawn a gun against him in a jail corridor.

"Kind of late asking, isn't he?"

"Kind of," Pierre admitted. "It'll take doing to keep him above ground, now!"

"The hell with Perigord!" Challon growled. "That's why we're out here in the lava—to keep clear. That's why we've been waiting. We've got no stake in town. We'll go in when the air's clear—not before!"

"Marc, listen," Pierre Challon said earnestly. "Think about it, now! What holds a piece of country together? A few folks' ambitions and what they try to build, maybe. Some decent women. Profit for them that work and kids to take over where the old ones leave off. But mostly it's the law. That's what Hugh Perigord is. You and me made him that. Maybe we could have done better, but it's too late to change, now. That woman you left on the XO has given Cy Van Cleave and his brush-runners a taste for something besides sow-belly and beans. They're hungry. Hugh's about all that's left in their way. We got to back him!"

"You're still talking like the XO!" Challon said.

"The county," Pierre corrected sharply. "It and the ranch has always been the same, really. Maybe you don't care who's sleeping in your house, but we got to *think* of our friends. We been cussed plenty, but folks have eaten and gone about their business without much trouble mainly because we run our ranch according to the best lights we could. Now either Hugh slaps iron onto Van Cleave or that bunch will bid in Prentice's note, whip Range into line, and run the county their way—

from our ranch!"

"Prentice won't sell that note," Challon said stubbornly.

"No? He got Judge Faraday up from Santa Fe this morning. He sued for foreclosure and Judge Faraday entered summary judgment half an hour before Hugh left town. The XO goes on the block tomorrow. Kind of irregular and hasty, but legal enough, I reckon. Prentice can't help himself, now. The law says he's got to sell to the highest bidder. If there's no law in Range in the morning, who's going to bid against Van Cleave and live long enough to get his money to the auctioneer?"

Challon frowned. Here, again, were cards he had not anticipated. He thought Pierre was waiting for a decision from him. He was wrong.

"Hank and me and the boys are heading for town, Marc," the old man said quietly.

"If you was in shape, you'd be riding with us, Marc," Hank Bayard added. "Me and the boys'll watch out for Pierre."

It was a loyal untruth. Bayard knew Challon would not make this ride in any health. And it would take the good Lord to watch out for Pierre in his present mood. Challon followed the two of them into the yard and watched his father swing to saddle before he tried a final protest, stabbing at Pierre's practicality.

"So Anson is dead and Van Cleave killed him. So there'll be guns on the streets of Range tomorrow. Jason Prentice is still no fool about money. He'll take up that note himself, knowing it'll bring him the XO at a tenth of its value. We've got cash in the bank and more in the whitefaces, but nothing near what the ranch is really

worth. Even we couldn't stand up to Prentice in open bidding. Van Cleave hasn't got a chance!"

"You been really running the ranch the last ten years, Marc," Pierre said wearily. "Marcy was your wife. Maybe you're right about all of this. I don't know. Hank and me tried to show you this afternoon what we thought was the easiest way. That's the last try I'm making. If there's ever a Challon back on the XO, it'll be you that puts him there. This ride's between me and my God, boy. When I turn in under the sod—and I'm wore down enough to be ready anytime—I aim to sleep good!"

Pierre reined away. Elena came out of the house. Challon reached for her but she pulled gently away.

"I'm going with Pierre and Hank, Marc," she said. "Pierre's right, this time. I've tried to tell you. There is more than just that woman and you, here under the mesas. I have friends in Range, too—people in town who will need help tonight and tomorrow more than you will."

She ran down across the yard. Challon turned back into the house, shutting the door behind him. Tia Pozner went quietly into the kitchen. Challon sank down on the settee where he had been so short a time ago with 'Lena against him and a conviction of rightness pounding steadily with his pulse through him. Now 'Lena was gone, and with her, the conviction.

In a moment or two Tia returned with a cup of coffee from the pot always standing on the back of every grass-country stove when there was a fire under the lids. She put the cup

down beside him.

"It's hard for a man to know how much a woman loves him," she said softly in Spanish.

"He finds out, sooner or later," Challon said harshly.

"Or thinks he does," Tia corrected. "A man can be a fool but still his woman loves him. She can't help herself."

Challon glared accusingly at Jim Pozner's widow. She was Spanish. She was of the lava and the grass. Her people were in Range. Her husband had become a part of the gray-green sod. As much as one individual could, she represented this country which had been his life. She was an almost perfect example of the people of whom he had been thinking when he promised Marcy that the grass and those who lived upon it would eventually defeat her and drive her from the XO. Yet Tia Pozner was not thinking of Marcy, now; she was thinking of him. And she thought he was a fool.

He didn't answer her and Tia went quietly back into the kitchen. Challon tried a cigarette and found it tasteless. He felt empty, tired, and he clutched at the thought that he had possibly overdone, that weariness was preventing clear thought. Stretched out on the settee, he tried to rest, but the piece of furniture was too short for his frame. After a few minutes he rose and kicking out of his boots spilled down on the thick mattress in the bedroom. He failed to doze here, also, but a stubbornness kept him down.

It was darkening outside when he finally rose with an angry, churning restlessness, tugged on his boots, and went into the kitchen. The stove was cold. The lamp was not lit. All of the china and utensils were in place on the shelves. No preparations for an evening meal were in evidence. And Tia Pozner sat in a chair in one corner, her hands folded in her lap. He realized she had been waiting for him—that she had waited through the long afternoon.

"You said I was a fool a while ago," he said roughly. "Why?"

Tia looked at him and smiled slowly. "Because you don't know when you have what you want."

"'Lena?"

"Yes, 'Lena. But the other thing, too. You've been waiting. What for? Until the woman who shamed your pride has nothing. I have understood that. I think others have, too. It is big thinking to demand so much in payment for an injury. We have expected big thinking from a Challon. We have expected big revenge. But not stupidity! Tell me, what does that woman have now?"

She paused. "The XO? There are papers filed in town which take the ranch from her. You heard that. She has a man, maybe? Anson Prentice is dead, and no woman can have the deadly little snake from Mora. She has hope? What can she hope for, now? The waiting is done, but you don't see it. Isn't that being a fool?"

Marc stared at her, realizing it had not been weariness which had obstructed his thinking, which had kept him from sleep this afternoon. It had been the thinking, itself. And he had refused to admit its inevitable conclusion. He thought he understood why, now. He had beaten Marcy, if his original desire to see her one day stand barefoot and destitute on the grass was sufficient. But he had lost the larger stake for which he had been playing. He had lost the XO. Too much had become involved in his quarrel with

Marcy. Too much upon which he had not counted. So defeat was actually his. And it was this he could not face.

He could have gone into town as Pierre had gone, to walk a familiar street with the knowledge he would never again have his old place on it. But he could not meet the eyes of those who saw too clearly the colossal folly of having traded off two lifetimes of Challon effort for a brief instant of revenge.

He could see the resentment in Tia Pozner—in others who had lived long in the shadow of the Challons. No matter who held title to the XO, it would always in part be public property, and Marc Challon had ignored the public interest. It was for this that he was not forgiven. He looked down at the small, slightly graying woman in the chair before him.

"Could you drive me to town, Tia?"

The woman smiled broadly and stood up. Challon saw her coat and shawl were neatly folded on the back of the chair, ready and waiting. His lips tightened.

A man did not alter the mold and pattern of what he was. He didn't outwit the things to which he was bound. His shadow varies with the height of the sun, not with the variance in his own nature. Tia Pozner had known this. She had known it when Pierre and 'Lena and the others had not. Otherwise she would not have waited as she had here. There was wisdom in her eyes. He hoped 'Lena would have the same wisdom in time—he hoped she would have her aunt's sureness as well as her beauty. There might be a day when Marc Challon would need counsel as he needed it, now. Turning, he strode rapidly back into the bedroom for his own gear.

Chapter Sixteen

Marcy's Last Card

WITH Tia Pozner at the reins beside him, the rocking buckboard under him, and the evening air in his face, Challon found the old feeling of directness heartening. He understood the morass of indecision into which he had fallen—the refusal to face facts which had at first distressed and later infuriated Pierre. His plan had been so simple in the beginning. It had involved only Marcy and Anson Prentice and himself. He had foreseen corrosion in Prentice toward Marcy and had counted on it. But he had not counted on Van Cleave. He hadn't counted on a settlement between Anse and Marcy which would pass control and an avenue to regaining the XO out of his reach.

He had foreseen the day when Marcy would have had enough of the grass and the grass of her. On that day he had believed she would send for him, that she would beg for help. And when she did, he planned to use a portion of the Prentice money lying in the Challon account in Stuart's bank to buy Marcy and Anson off of the ranch.

He would have bought close. He would have had profit left. Enough to complete his irrigation system without encumbrances. With a relish for the irony, he would have called the new reservoir Lake Marcy—maybe Lake Prentice. New Mexico would have smiled at that and talked of Challon humor. New Mexico had known much of irony and would understand it.

But a shot in the back had intervened—a triple murder in a jail corri-

dor and Tom Halliard's shattered face and a note in Jason Prentice's hands had intervened. And with his body broken it had been impossible to think as he might have thought on his feet. Van Cleave had become the barb, imbedding himself deeper with each shift of event. Van Cleave's destruction at any time would have returned the others to the course he had planned, but a man half dead could not destroy Van Cleave. And in addition, the original plan had been passive. He had not wanted to abandon that. He had not wanted to destroy Marcy or her tools himself. He had wanted to wait while they destroyed themselves. Prentice had obliged, too handsomely. Van Cleave would not.

Now there was more to consider than Van Cleave, but it still was not too complicated when a man moved toward it. Luck would finally decide who held the XO. Challon luck looked thin, now. It didn't matter. Pierre could be saved—Hank and the boys with him. Range could be saved a violence it had not earned. And perhaps he could save for himself the pride 'Lena Casamajor had once had in Marc Challon.

At a fork in the road, Tia pulled up and looked questioningly at Marc. Both tracks led to Range. The southernmost and most direct did not pass by the home sections of the XO. Challon indicated the northern track with a tilt of his head.

"We'll see if he's at the ranch, first," he said. "If he isn't, we'll go on into town."

Bright lights were visible in the XO house from three or four miles out. Challon wondered if Marcy needed this brilliance to grapple with her conscience. If it was not wholly dead, it must be giving her hell.

Tia spoke of the lights when they reached the head of the XO lane.

"Twenty lamps," she said. "A lot of people!"

Challon nodded. Among a people frugal with oil, the size of a night gathering was appraised at a distance by the number of lamps alight. Marcy had every wick in the XO house burning. Marc turned Tia down a branch track leading from the ranch lane. There was a dim light in the bunkhouse. He touched Tia's arm. She reined up. He swung to the ground.

"Any trouble will be at the bunkhouse. If he's here, I'll try to take him peaceably to town with me. If there's shooting, head straight across the yard to the lane. That should get you clear. Go straight to Pierre in town. Tell him exactly what happened here and make sure he understands why I came by this way. Understand?"

The woman nodded. Challon crossed on cat's feet to the bunkhouse door, tripped its latch, and swung it slowly open. The room had only one occupant. Dressed in startlingly clean shirt and a neater pair of pants than his kind usually wore, Marcy's cook was sprawled on a bunk, hopelessly drunk.

Challon swung toward the main house, still puzzled by the lights blazing there. A war parley could be going on—Marcy and Van Cleave and their men. He had to know at least about Van Cleave and the men. He signaled and Tia drove the buckboard along parallel to him as he approached the *ramada*. The wheels rolled onto gravel and made sound. Tia pulled up again, this time squarely in front of the house.

The front door opened wide as Marc

stepped into the lower end of the *ramada*. Marcy came from the house, paused an instant, and went out the path to the drive at a half-run. Her voice, curiously unsteady and thinly veneered with an almost ludicrous hospitality, reached out ahead of her to Tia, in the buckboard.

"My dear!" she cried. "Come in, please! You're a little early, I think, but the others will be arriving shortly and anyway we'll have a minute of talk to ourselves." She halted at the buckboard wheel, her face uptilted to a woman she had never seen before. "It's time I met my neighbors. I'm Marcy Challon—"

A rush of understanding swept Challon. The lamps, the unsteadiness in Marcy's voice, her cloying welcome. She was expecting guests. Her eager acceptance of Tia Pozner as the first arrival, although it was nearly nine, betrayed the rest of it. Those she had expected had not come. This accounted for the cook in the bunkhouse, also—his receiving costume and his drunkenness when he realized the uncomfortable effort in preparation had been for nothing. Challon stepped into the *ramada* archway and quietly called out across the little lawn:

"Watch your eyes, Marcy—she'll scratch them out. That's Jim Pozner's widow!"

Marcy pivoted, almost losing her balance, almost as though Challon's voice was a heavy bullet, driving into her body. She stared at his lamplit silhouette, one hand distractedly brushing a strand of hair back from her face. She started toward him, unwillingness to believe what her senses told her evident in every lagging motion of her body. She stopped a scant yard from him, her lips a very long time in forming a single word.

"Marc!"

Tension broke, then. She rushed against Challon, grasping the lapels of his jacket with a fierceness which sent a twinge of pain through the half-knit muscles of his back. Tears streaked her cheeks and choked her.

"Marc! Oh, Marc, I've needed you so desperately!"

"Where's Van Cleave?" Challon asked stonily.

"Gone. I'm done with him, Marc—his rottenness, his stealing, his—his savagery. I ordered him off of the ranch. Only cookie is left. Marc, listen! Cy shot you. He killed Anson, too, right in the barn, there, a week ago. He killed Anson and didn't tell me until tonight!"

"I know," Challon said. "Where'd Van Cleave go?"

"He's going to try to take the ranch—the XO, Marc. Anson's father got a judgment against me on a note Anson made me give him—"

"I know about that, too."

"Cy's going to bid the ranch in with money he's stolen and with his men to back him up. They'll kill anybody in Cy's way—Sheriff Perigord, even Mr. Prentice, himself!"

"They may try," Challon agreed shortly. He glanced into the brightly illuminated interior of the house his mother had built—rooms whose quiet security seemed yet untouched by Marcy's long alien presence among them. "Expecting company?"

"My neighbors—" Marcy was nearing hysteria. She clung to Challon. "I sent an invitation to everybody I could think of in the county—the kind of a party your mother used to give here. I wanted to show them—Marcy Challon sitting her saddle on this ranch as well

as any man! Then, after I learned about that judgment in town and Cy told me what he was going to do, I hoped I could talk the county people into stopping him—maybe putting up the necessary money for me on shares or something. I thought I could do it, Marc—"

She stopped, her laugh breaking like glass.

"I told you in the beginning—" Challon murmured.

"A hundred guests expected and the only one to show up an uninvited dead man!" Marcy checked herself, her old strength returning miraculously. "You can stop Cy, Marc—only you could do it. And you've got money—more than enough. You could make Anson's father be reasonable the same way Cy will, if necessary. We'll go into town together, Marc. Not for me—for the ranch. We can settle the shares between us later. I don't want much—just enough to get started again—"

"We don't have any shares in the XO, Marcy—either of us!"

"There's got to be something left. I was your wife for five years—"

"I haven't forgotten that, either!"

There was finality in Challon's words. Marcy's face drained of color. She stared at him through a stony white mask Challon knew his memory would retain in infinite detail forever. A frigid white incarnation of hatred. This was revenge. Challon didn't like its taste in his mouth. He felt a little sick and very empty. Marcy spoke with soft intensity.

"A buckboard with a Mexican-woman driver and a man still flinching from a wound which should have killed him can't make very good time, Marc. There are saddle horses in the barn that could reach Range half an hour ahead of the best you could do. And I can ride the fastest of them. You know how I can ride."

"I'll be happy when I've forgotten everything about you," Challon told her with harsh honesty.

"Cy has what he intends to do all worked out," she continued. "He doesn't know you're alive and headed his way. Surprise is your best chance. If he was warned before you reached town, you wouldn't live till morning!"

Challon disengaged her arresting hand from his arm with a powerful grip. Her head came up. For an instant she looked like the headstrong girl who had contrived to meet him on the streets of Trinidad a long time ago.

"So sure, Marc, aren't you?" she breathed. "The young god and the old god and the queen that's dead—the Challons!" She spat. "The Challons and the XO! Hear me, Marc: I promise you that live or die tonight, you'll remember Marcy Bennett to your last breath!"

She wheeled and plunged into the house. Challon walked slowly out to the buckboard and climbed into it. Tia Pozner wordlessly put the team into motion. They rolled out the lane and turned onto the road to Range.

Chapter Seventeen

The Devil Rides at Night

THERE was a ford at the second section corner. Tia was slanting the buckboard down into this when Challon heard hoofbeats behind them. He twisted around on his seat. Behind them a great pillar of tumbling flame and ruddy smoke stood against

the deep blue night sky. Flames fed by the time-enriched timbers and furnishings of the XO house—Belle Challon's house—the heart of a dream two generations old. His own body in that heat could not have brought Challon more agony. This was Marcy's mark.

"I hoped you wouldn't look back, *Señor*," Tia Pozner murmured. "I saw it only moments ago. She must have overturned every lamp!"

Above the roaring blood in his ears Challon again became aware of the horse overtaking them. For an instant rider and animal were in full silhouette against the distant flames. A tall and powerful horse with a tremendous stride. The kind of animal strong men rode with the caution of mutual respect. And Marcy up, hair flying, leaning loosely into the pistoning strides of the great beast, sitting her seat with the supremely indifferent confidence of a drunken Indian.

She splashed through the ford a rod downstream and scrambled up the farther bank without slackening pace. She veered here up along the side of a rising basalt and obsidian ridge, along the sheer flank of which ran a rugged but much shorter trail into Range than the wagon road along the flats. Iron shoes struck sparks from volcanic stone as the horse thundered on. Marcy *could* ride!

"The old ones say that the devil rides at night across the mesas like that!" Tia Pozner said.

Challon looked again at the flames behind them. There was magnificence about the XO house, even in destruction. One thought recurred. The house had meant even more to Pierre Challon than to his son. It was all that remained to Pierre of the woman he had brought into the Territory from Kansas City. This would kill Pierre more certainly than a bullet. Marcy had well known the immense tragedy of this last blow. Pierre had lived too long, his back too straight through the years, to die now of a broken heart.

Tia Pozner lifted her reins. With a strong physical effort Challon turned his back on the pyre at the XO.

"Might as well take it easy," he told the woman beside him. "We've got plenty of time, now. Marcy will beat us to town, whatever we do."

Tia halted the buckboard at the edge of town. "I can swing around and climb Goat Hill from the back side to Uppertown-Chihuahua-town. 'Lena and I have cousins there. We can send down for news of what's happening in town. This road will be watched since that woman rode in ahead of us."

"Get me to the back side of the hotel without being seen, if you can," Challon told her. "Then go up to your cousin's. Find 'Lena and keep her with you. I'll manage the rest."

Earnestness giving real meaning to her words, Tia spoke softly, "I hope so. I will pray it, *Señor* Challon!"

Following an across-lots footpath below the street, Tia drove surely through a patchwork of irregular garden plots, makeshift unfenced yards, and among the low, flat, one-room shacks of the *pelados* which fringed every community on the grass. When they were abreast of the rear of the hotel, Challon alighted.

So many lights were up and so strong a sense of arrested movement hung over the town that it was apparent this was not a night of usual things. A suspended silence, like the pressured suspension which lay over the earth during the long, soundless

seconds between the knifing of giant lightning in the sky and the ensuing roll of its thunder against the slopes during the summer's savage storms in the high hills. Tia Pozner leaned toward Challon.

"Wait until morning," she whispered. "You will be stronger, then. It is a saying that the good have no errands in the darkness—only in the sun. My people will be on the street in the morning—not tonight."

"You stay with 'Lena at your cousin's!" Challon ordered again sharply. He swung away. The buckboard creaked on up the hill. Challon moved toward the ugly back wall of the hotel.

His mind was completely ordered. Pierre and Hank had brought the boys in to back Hugh Perigord. They had been fundamentally right in this. Perigord was tonight still the law and had to be backed. But Pierre knew only one way to handle these things. It was no detraction from the giant Pierre Challon had once been to believe that in his most competent days he had not been a match for Cy Van Cleave when men worked with guns. Certainly Hank Bayard and the old XO crew were not the equals of the deadly hawks Van Cleave had brought up out of Lincoln County.

Challon knew the temptation of violence. It pumped through him, now, an almost uncontainable compulsion to sear out with the flames of his own anger the obstacles in his way. A towering desire to break with his hands, to use injury and death for his own purpose and to hell with the odds—a delusive conviction of invincibility.

This he had from Pierre—the thunder of the gods. But colder recesses of his mind clamped a lid upon it. His wound made it impossible for him to meet even the first of the physical demands of fury and he was therefore obligated to a more quiet channel.

Pierre would say this was not the Challon way and Pierre would be right. It had not been the Challon way in the past to which Pierre belonged, but change was inevitable. The XO house was gone. The ranch no longer had enemies on the lava, such enmity dying with Jim Pozner and the Hyatts. Marc Challon was without a wife and without land, his fight for his grass abandoned to fight for the lives of others. A railroad would be in Range before summer's end. These were changes, also. There was no returning to the days before any of them.

There were some men for whom death by a gun was no defeat but a certain event of life, so that they died by a bullet and were not touched beyond their ruptured bodies. Van Cleave was one of these. There had to be a better way than Pierre's directness, and it had to be used before Pierre recklessly poured the remnants of his life and his blood onto the thirsty sand which lay beneath New Mexico sod. A way to be used before someone fired the bullet bearing Cy Van Cleave's name—before an accident of marksmanship let the man die defiantly on his feet, rooting the seed of a legend which might grow to conceal, even from those whose own memories could strip it away, the kind of a man he had been.

Pierre had said the Challons were bound to the law they had created in Red River County. The law, in itself, was actually as unimportant as the men who supported it. The law had been built to achieve justice and it was of justice that Marc Challon was thinking, now.

The Range Hotel was an old building. Its exterior stairs creaked under Challon's climbing weight. The door at their head, letting into the upper hall, was open. Challon had no difficulty locating Jason Prentice's room. Two railroad detectives lounged in chairs on either side of it. Their presence settled Challon's first question. Van Cleave had made no overt move in Prentice's direction as yet. Without being seen, Challon slipped back onto the stairs and descended quickly to the lot behind the hotel again, circling toward the street.

With one foot up on the walk at the front corner of the hotel, he paused, checked by the simultaneous restraint of some mute sense and something he saw on the planking before him. Two empty brass shell cases lay on the walk. They had not long been there or foot traffic would have dislodged them. Recent gunfire on the street was certain. A man had paused here to reload a couple of chambers in his gun. He had been hurried or he would have retrieved the empty cases. Brass was expensive and a man could reload fired cases at home for a quarter the cost of boxed new factory shells.

The sensitory warning was something else. The subdued, restless movement of which he had earlier been aware had not been in the open but behind shaded windows and closed doors—perhaps in men's minds. The street in front of him was ominously empty. He circled back behind the hotel and moved a hundred yards up the hill, well back from the street. Rank weed growth here gave him cover to the walk and there were no lights. He crossed the street swiftly and went deep into the opposite lots before turning down toward the courthouse.

In the shadow of this, at the end of a thirty-yard track dragged through the weeds from the half-door of the cellar of the building, he stumbled on a slight body. He knew the features. This was the boy with courage enough to carry the story of Van Cleave's murder of Anson Prentice to the law at Range. Hugh Perigord's prisoner, locked up for self-protection as a valuable witness against Van Cleave. The crown of his head had been crushed by a gun barrel. He had been jerked from his protective cell, killed, and dragged out here. Van Cleave had not wanted living evidence against him. Challon knew he would find the cellar door of the courthouse open.

Chapter Eighteen

Beyond Mending

LAMPLIGHT filtered into the cellar from a steep, slatted stair at the far end. There was blood on the treads where the body out in the weeds had been dragged down them. At their head, in a little ell off of the jail corridor, Challon paused. He thought the street-level floor of the building was completely empty. He couldn't be sure of the floor above.

He breathed heavily through his nose. His shirt was wet under his arms. The metal eyelets of the breather holes in the reinforced fabric there were cold against his skin. The muscles of his thighs and back were too springy—unsteadily so.

He thought he was moving too fast. That had to be it. He hadn't come to Range too late—he couldn't have come too late. There were only so many tal-

lies against a man in anything. He had already suffered his share. His book was full. He knew damned well he wasn't too late.

Steadying himself, he moved past the gaping cells of the jail and turned into the corridor leading to Perigord's office—the corridor in which Cy Van Cleave had stood to put a bullet into his back. Perigord's office was dark. Challon stepped into it. There was no disorder except for the lamp. Its wick was still turned high and the faint odor of warm oil was in the air, but the chimney and shade were gone. Their chards crunched like brittle gravel under Challon's boots. A stray bullet from the street could have shattered chimney glass and snuffed the flame. The street door stood open. Challon moved into it.

The answer to his second question lay on the walk. Pierre and the old XO crew had not been sufficient defense. Starshine winked faintly on the silver badge pinned to Hugh Perigord's shirt. The man was otherwise unrecognizable. He had taken a bullet quarteringly through his face. He was dead.

Two others lay farther out in the dust of the street. Challon saw with relief that he knew neither of them. Perigord had always claimed handiness with his gun. Here was possible proof. Straight across, folded limply half over the rail before the Red River Saloon, was a fourth lifeless figure. Even at this distance Challon recognized a piebald calfskin jacket which had hung nights on an XO bunkhouse peg for half a dozen years. The man was Al Carlin, the best bronc handler who had ever drawn Challon pay.

This, then, was the source of the suspended feeling Challon had thought so marked as he rode into town. The lightning had already struck. Range was waiting for the thunder and that it had not already come rolling down this empty street in retaliation meant only one thing to Challon, now. There was no thunderer. Pierre was dead. This was the answer to his third question.

As he turned back from the door Challon's attention fell on a rack over Perigord's desk, from which hung a number of implements of the law. Several hand guns, some serviceable and some oddities, in their own right or by virtue of former owners. Some shortened, heavy-bore rifles and an equally shortened shotgun. A notable collection of the knives which accompanied the Spanish language wherever it traveled. But Challon's attention passed the weapons, drawn to three pairs of brightly nickeled handcuffs dangling with their keys from one row of hooks. He lifted one of these down on a sudden impulse and dropped it into his jacket pocket. At the same instant he heard voices and quick footfalls on the stairs leading from the upper floor of the building. One voice was distinguishable.

"Damned right I'm sure! Ducked in the cellar door. Just a flash. Don't know who—"

An unintelligible answer followed. Two men, now in the jail section and moving rapidly toward the office. His presence discovered and retreat blocked, Challon had no alternative. He stepped out into the street past Perigord's body. A man shouted. A gun fired. Challon doubled over and started to run toward the opposite walk, silently cursing the stiffness of his wound. More guns fired, now from the second story of the courthouse. Lead whispered close and Challon forgot his

stiffness, running with reaching strides. Ahead a familiar voice startlingly sang out his name:

"Marc—Marc, here!"

He saw Bayard's figure loping along the walk. Hank cut into the street toward him, flipping up the gun in his hand to fire at the face of the courthouse. The cadence of gunfire rose. Hank reached him and shouldered Challon toward the door of the Red River. They hit the walk before the saloon together and Hank went down in a flat, nose-skinning dive, driving his head hard against the wall of the building. Challon thought Hank had stumbled and pulled up, aware of lead cannonading into the weathered siding before him, waiting for Hank to get up.

Bayard moved, his buttocks rising high as he pumped his knees under himself. But his head stayed down like that of an axed steer. He spilled over onto his side, his legs pumping slowly, his boots making dry, rasping sounds on the planking of the walk, clearly audible to Challon over the gun explosions across the street and the bullet strikes about him. With incredulous shock he saw the torrent of blood spilling from Bayard's mouth. The front door of the saloon jerked open and Marc's name sounded again:

"For God's sake, Mr. Challon—!"

His instant of immobility shattered, then. Challon hooked Bayard's uppermost arm. Unable to lift the man with one shoulder still so bad, he dragged Hank, leaving a wide wet mark behind them on the walk. Young Lou Fentrice ducked out of the Red River, so scared every pimple on his face was raised to twice normal height, but he bent and got Hank's body up across his shoulders.

Then the saloon door was shut behind them and the angry night was outside. The old mustiness of the Red River was about Challon and he knew he would find his father here. So, incomprehensibly, was Elena here, emerging from among the familiar faces of his old crew to seize Challon's arms and press her face hard against the buttons of his jacket, sobbing.

"Where is he?" Challon asked.

'Lena turned toward the game room at the back of the dimly lit saloon. Challon wiped one hand absently against the seam of his pants. It had somehow gotten covered with blood.

"Hank—" he said to the girl. "Look after him, 'Lena. He's badly hit—"

She knelt obediently beside Bayard where Lou Fentrice had lowered him to the floor. Firing had broken off again outside. Challon pushed through his gray-faced, silent crewmen into the back room. More XO men were here, grim and self-effacing.

Pierre lay blanketless on a scarred pool table under the single hanging lamp, shirt off but boots on. His hair was damply tousled up in great ringed curls as it often was when he removed his hat after riding long in the sun.

Head in hands and elbows on knees, a young doctor, newly come to Range and known to Challon by face but not by name, sat waiting beside the table. He raised his head at Challon's approach and Pierre opened his eyes. The doctor made a quick, cautioning gesture at Challon. Pierre saw it.

"Damn it, quit trying to mend a busted pick!" he complained with thin peevishness.

The doctor shook his head with incredulity and weariness. Challon saw that Pierre was right with the blunt

rightness of his kind. He had been giving the doctor a bad time. His pick was broken beyond mending. The great, gray-matted expanse of his chest was marked with two geometrically neat surgical compresses which looked strangely at odds with the ruggedness of the huge body to which they were affixed. And the doctor had a right to his incredulity. Challon thought either wound would have killed outright any other man he had ever known. Challon nodded to the doctor.

"New man hurt up front. See if you can do anything for him."

The doctor lifted his kit and moved across the room. Challon bent at the head of the table. Pierre blinked at him.

"I did this, Pierre," Challon said, self-accusation depressing his voice almost to inaudibility.

"The hell you did!" Pierre growled. "Don't cheat the devil of his due, boy! Van Cleave done it. Me and Hugh walking out front of Hugh's office to hang a noose on Van Cleave's neck when he come loping into town an hour after sunset. A noose for busting Anson Prentice's belly and knocking over a Santa Fe pay roll and ventilating Stuart's safe at the bank. There's been worse things than that done in New Mexico, boy, and nobody hanged for 'em, either. But not in our county. That's the difference, Marc. Not in our county. We go by the law. Remember that!"

Pierre paused and coughed very slightly. His voice strengthened. There was relish in his tone.

"Hugh Perigord and Pierre Challon —we was good men in our day, both of us. But that little devil cut us both down; one for Hugh and two for me. Sure as hell knew his odds. He can shoot like an angel!"

"I should have come in with you!" Challon said bitterly.

"Damn your brass!" Pierre grunted. "You think you could wear my boots? Or even Hugh's? You wasn't born soon enough, boy. You timed it just right. Hank went looking for you while ago. He find you?"

"Yes," Challon said. "He found me."

Pierre's eyes closed for a moment. "Good," he said more quietly. "We always handled a tough chore in shifts, remember? Me first, then you. It's your turn, now, Marc. And the odds are down for you. Me and Hugh and Hank and the boys raised our share of hell. Van Cleave ain't got over six-eight men left. Them that are ought to be as jumpy as jacks in a thunderstorm. And nobody's been hurt but them and us. You see to it nobody's hurt from here on out. We've always kept our troubles off somebody else's grass. Don't turn this into a war with everybody in town caught in the middle. Wind up our chore for Hugh and me—"

Marc nodded wordlessly. Pierre was silent for a long moment. He grimaced at a twinge of pain of which Challon realized he was no more than half conscious, then spoke again, very softly.

"I'm glad you're here, boy. It's hell to be lonesome—"

His eyes closed. The doctor returned. He touched Challon's arm.

"Too much talking," he warned. "He's got to be quiet!"

Challon backed incredulously from the table. "You mean there's a chance?"

The doctor looked at him with a strained, baffled expression. "He should have been dead when he hit the ground out there," he said. "But he got up and walked in here on his

own feet—slapped a man out of the way who tried to help him. What do I know of the chances of a man like that?" Then, more quietly: "No, not a chance in a million, Mr. Challon. Internal hemorrhage. Any time—any time—"

The doctor scrubbed his hand dazedly across his eyes.

"Pour yourself a drink," Challon advised him bluntly. "You're not apt to have any more customers." And he turned back to the front of the saloon.

Hank Bayard was on his feet at the upper end of the bar, wryly sloshing his mouth out with whisky, dumping the red wash into a spittoon. Hank had lost half of the skin on his nose, lips, and forehead, and Challon thought he had lost some teeth, but he was still on his feet. He was otherwise unhurt. Like Challon, himself, luck had carried him through the barrage flung at them from the courthouse. Challon stopped at his elbow.

"You clumsy damned fool, can't you keep your feet under you?"

"I'll learn," Hank said thickly, warping his puffed face into a grin.

Challon saw 'Lena waiting for him, apart from the others, and he moved on to her. She came against him, into his arms and close, with an eagerness divorced from affection. This was a need more elemental than the need of a woman for a man. This was fear—fear of something grown too terribly big to be longer understood.

"Pierre, Marc—" 'Lena said brokenly. "Pierre—"

"He wouldn't have it any different," Challon said. "Go back and ask him. He'll tell you."

"Marc, I can't—" 'Lena's body trembled. "I—oh, Marc, it was me who asked him to help the sheriff arrest those men!"

"That's what you want, too—Van Cleave arrested?" Challon asked softly.

The girl nodded. "According to the law," she agreed. "I want Range to see it can be done that way—that the Challons can do it—that they want to. I want Mr. Prentice and Judge Farraday to see it. No guns, no broken windows, no one hurt. I didn't know it was impossible. I didn't understand. I thought—"

"I know," Challon said. "You knew Pierre was Pierre Challon. You thought he could do anything. It's all right, 'Lena. So did Pierre."

"It's turned out so wrong. Those men waiting across the street—waiting for morning or for somebody here to show themselves. Van Cleave has done just what he planned. He's emptied the street. He's killed anybody who might put charges against him. He's frightened anybody else who still could into silence. What kind of an auction will it be in the morning with only his bid? Do you think Mr. Prentice will look for other offers or bid against Van Cleave himself?"

"No," Challon said. "Prentice is under a bed at the hotel. He'll stay there till this is over. Building a railroad is his business—not putting up a fight for a ranch."

"Next week the papers will start saying it was the Challons who came lawlessly to town tonight with Sheriff Perigord siding them," 'Lena said heavily. "The papers will say the Challons came to town to take by force what you sold that woman in good faith. And folks get to believing what the papers say in just a little while. They forget the papers have always been afraid of the XO; that they'll be more afraid of the ranch with Van

Cleave on it."

"Where's Marcy?" Challon asked abruptly. "Have you seen her?"

"She's here?"

"Yes—someplace."

"Marc, what can you do, now?"

"Nothing for a while. Pierre's lonesome. I should have stuck with him before. I have to, now. Let's get out back."

"But after—after sunup—?"

"Reckon I'll have to finish the chore he started."

'Lena glanced uncomprehendingly at him but he did not elaborate. They started toward the back room. As they passed Bayard, Hank fell in with them without a summons from either—accepting XO grief—Challon grief—as he had accepted all of the good and the bad on the ranch since the day he had gone to work as a boy for Pierre, without order and without question.

Chapter Nineteen

"Only a Beginning—"

IN THE silent interior of the Red River Saloon Challon men drank long and deeply, looking often at the high windows in the east wall of the back room, speculating in monosyllables as to the coming of the sun. But each knew it was not the sun for which they waited, but for an old man to die; and the knowledge brought each his grief, so that the virile whisky of the Red River warmed nothing within them.

There was one exception. The young doctor had known Pierre only by hearsay and his faith in his professional judgment was shattered and it was doubtful if he had ever tasted the like of the six-foot brew in the Red River's casks. He became quietly and thoroughly drunk and at last slept heavily in his chair, the deep rasping of his breathing often drowning out that of the dying man on the table beside him.

Challon and 'Lena and Hank Bayard stood motionlessly in a row along the table rim where Pierre could see them whenever he opened his eyes. It seemed to give him satisfaction. He smiled once.

"It's a damned shame the governor couldn't have come, too!" he said.

Much later, with almost no weight to his voice, he looked up at 'Lena and spoke to her alone.

"My wife could bake biscuits," he said. "The damnedest biscuits! Can you?"

"Yes, Mr. Challon," 'Lena answered unsteadily.

"Pierre!" the old man growled faintly. "Biscuits, I said—not *tortillas!*"

"Yes. Biscuits—Pierre."

A sigh of satisfaction gusted from Pierre. He rolled his eyes to his son.

"Only thing that really worried me," he said. "Them Mexican pancakes ain't worth a damn for breakfast. Hard on the belly. You better marry the girl, Marc!"

Challon nodded wordlessly. Pierre closed his eyes again. The windows in the east wall were bright. They grew brighter. The air within the closed room began to warm noticeably. 'Lena and Challon and Hank Bayard waited by the rim of the table.

"We'll put water on three thousand acres east of the house, first," Pierre murmured. "It's just a beginning—"

The words were not his. They belonged to his son. Challon and Hank and 'Lena looked at each other. The

crewmen talked softly among themselves. The young doctor stirred in his chair, looked up with startled eyes, and rose stiffly beside the table. Challon was grateful he didn't touch Pierre's wrist, his eyes, with the curious, probing fingers of his trade.

"Somebody find a blanket or something," the doctor said hoarsely. He turned his head to Challon.

"He's dead."

They all gathered in the Red River's barroom. The waiting was over. Challon felt their quiet, intense regard, their speculation, their willingness. His hand in his jacket pocket was tightly clamped about a pair of chain-linked metal rings and his mind was fastened on his father's last request.

Pierre had been entitled to his folly; Challon was entitled to his own. And this was also what 'Lena wanted, what she had preached in her unobtrusive way from the day she had first ridden out of this town with him. A day when his purposes had been vastly different from this.

Bayard was facing him. Challon pointed to the end of the bar, where his own gun and cartridge belt lay.

"No iron," he said to Hank. "No guns. Shed them."

Astonished, half angry, Hank took a protesting step forward.

"Shed them," Challon repeated harshly. "Pierre's orders—and mine!"

Hank unsnapped his belt and slammed it onto the bar. The others reluctantly followed.

"Pierre's orders! By God, I'm glad he can't see this!" Bayard murmured quite audibly.

Challon would have let it go, but 'Lena picked it up. Her head lifted high.

"Are you, Hank? I'm not! I wish he could see this! I think he's watching!"

"Back me, Hank," Challon said. "Keep your mouths shut, but back me."

He freed the locking bar and swung the front door open. He saw Van Cleave. Perigord's body had been removed from the opposite walk. Van Cleave stood against a wall near where it had been. One of his men was beside him. The others were still at the upper windows of the courthouse. Challon saw sunlight on a rifle barrel there. Van Cleave grinned as Challon and his party filed beltlessly out of the Red River.

"You had to see it sooner or later, Challon," he called across the street. "A man is only so big."

"Yes," Challon agreed.

He stepped down from the walk and started unhurriedly across. He was thinking of Marcy. He didn't see her. He wondered about that. Van Cleave had shown no surprise at his appearance, but there were now many channels through which he might have learned Marc Challon did not lie dead out on the grass. Marcy could have told him. Others could have told him. It was hard to know, but Marcy wasn't in sight and she would relish this scene. She could be in the courthouse. She could be elsewhere. Van Cleave did not need her now and he would not long keep something of no use to him.

Challon wanted to know about Marcy—where she was—but he would not ask. It was only that she had begun this and he wanted her to see its end. Pierre could not, but he wanted Marcy

to see.

As he moved into the street he was aware of other movement. Art Treadwell and Stuart from the bank and some others in business dress appeared on the veranda of the Range Hotel, three doors away. There was a common grimness among them and in their midst were four other men, plainly present by compulsion. One was unmistakably Jason Prentice. Two were the Santa Fe detectives who had been on guard in the hotel corridor. Challon thought the fourth was the Territorial judge from Santa Fe.

His own appearance seemed to have been the signal for a general exodus. The street was filling in either direction, both groups moving in toward the center. Women among them. He saw Tia Pozner among the Spanish-Americans coming down from Goat Hill and Uppertown.

He was puzzled. There was danger here, grave danger for every person on the street. Curiosity could not account for this advance, nor was this crowd rallying to back him, certainly. 'Lena had told him Range—the country about it—believed him wrong from the beginning and so would not help him. This was 'Lena's country even more than it was his, this in spite of the fact he had once owned a great square of it. 'Lena would know the mood of its people more accurately than he could hope to know.

Van Cleave began to tense as Challon reached the center of the street. The man beside Van Cleave said something. The little man from Mora darted glances in both directions. Suddenly he snapped a command:

"That's far enough, Challon!"

Marc halted obediently.

"You want something?" Van Cleave demanded.

Challon also glanced both ways along the street. He shook his head and smiled.

"Me?" he asked. "This time, no. But you've got to talk to the county, Van Cleave."

The man shifted uneasily. Challon heard the metallic click of a rifle brought to cock above him.

"What is this?" Van Cleave protested, voice rising in pitch. "What's wanted?"

"Your hide," Challon told him bluntly. "Give it up the easy way. You know the charges. Hugh Perigord tried to read a part of them to you last night."

Van Cleave flattened against the building behind him. He grinned savagely.

"And what happened to Hugh?" he asked. "Leave it to a Challon to try an outsized bluff! I'll give this street just thirty seconds to clear. If it doesn't do it by itself, I'll empty it. It's too crowded for a man that's come to town to do a legitimate piece of business!"

"This isn't a Challon play and it isn't a bluff," Marc said steadily. "You and your boys better hoist your hands, Van Cleave."

He started forward again. Van Cleave slapped in the air and his gun was in his hand.

"Challon, by God I mean this!" he snapped thinly.

"You think they don't?" Challon tilted his head toward those coming along the street. "You and your boys got enough ammunition to cut them all down? Ever see what a crowd could do to a man with its hands if it got stirred up? Any of your boys ever see something like that?"

Challon brought his hand from his jacket pocket. Sun glinted from the

handcuffs he had lifted from Hugh Perigord's rack. He stepped up on the walk in front of Van Cleave.

That he had been able to come this far was answer enough as to Van Cleave's men above—as to the pallid man beside Van Cleave on the walk. There was an inevitability to justice which made it terrible when it came like this. Van Cleave was alone—alone with Marc Challon. The little man's gun, held far back against his body, was steady. Van Cleave flung another glance up the street. He smiled thinly then and fired his gun.

A man's life did not often depend upon an ability to read motive and impending action in others, but there was bound to be some of such skill acquired in bossing the rags and tags of a big ranch crew from boyhood onward. An instant before Van Cleave fired, Challon twisted sharply aside, striking outward and quarteringly downward with the chain-hung handcuff dangling from its mate in his hand. Van Cleave's bullet passed close to Challon but did not touch him. A great welt of flesh parted along a red-flowing seam across Van Cleave's forehead, blinding the man with blood.

Challon kicked hard at the now extended gun hand, breaking bone in the arm with an audible snap and arching the weapon out into the dust of the street. Thrusting Van Cleave roughly against the building behind him, Challon twice brought his knee savagely upward.

It was all a single flow of swift motion, so that even those who had seen it done would not remember clearly in an hour how it had been done. And it cost no great effort. Challon's breathing was still regular as he caught the sagging Van Cleave's good wrist and snapped steel onto it.

A man could build a great ranch out of a belief in his own rightness, ignoring all odds. He could shatter odds in another game with a similar belief. Challon jerked wickedly on the free cuff and passed it to Hank Bayard.

"Lock him up," he said quietly. "He's got the others on lead-strings. They'll come along."

It was afternoon before Challon and 'Lena had a room in the hotel to themselves, and then not wholly so. Pierre was still with them, and Marcy's shadow, and the brief minutes of uncertainty in the bright morning sun of the street, scant hours ago, and talk did not come readily between them.

Challon thought 'Lena shared his own relief when Art Treadwell came into the room. Art had a small paper parcel crushed in one hand. He was excited.

"Thank God the railroad's more important to Jason Prentice than anything else!" Treadwell crowed. "After watching that thing on the street this morning, he's afraid the county might take a stand like that against the railroad if he sat on plain rights. He's refused to bid for the XO!"

"Somebody will," Challon said heavily.

"You think anybody would dare bid against a Challon in Range today?" Treadwell demanded. "Hell, man, I entered a minimum bid for you. Prentice just signed an acceptance and the judge approved it. The bank's drawing up a draft for fifty thousand dollars for you to sign. You're going back onto the XO!"

'Lena's fingers bit into Marc's arm.

"Marc!" she cried. "Marc—!" Then, more quietly: "If Pierre could have

gone back with you!"

"With us," Challon corrected.

He was aware that the enthusiasm she had expected was not in him and that 'Lena was puzzled. She didn't know that Pierre had been saved a hurt worse than his wounds. He wouldn't have to see the ash overlying the foundations of the home he had built on the grass for his wife. 'Lena didn't understand that this was not yet whole and complete. There was Marcy, who had vanished. Challon had yet to know of Marcy.

However, 'Lena's puzzlement didn't dampen her own enthusiasm. She had been so long grave and troubled it was surprising to see her bright spirit revealed, now. She spun across the room to the door and then back to Marc.

"We can go back today—this afternoon!" she cried. "Back onto the grass! Hank and the boys and Tia with us. Marc, I've got to find Hank and tell him. I've got to find Tia. It's all right, isn't it?"

Challon grinned, slapping her affectionately across the round smallness of her hips as he might have an excitedly dancing youngster.

"Run all the way. Find them both."

"Run?—I will!" she cried. "I—I can't help it!"

The windows rattled with the bang of the door behind her and her heels made staccato clatter in the hall. Challon nodded at the closed door.

"I'm worried about that, Art," he said earnestly. "I've never wanted anything more than I want to marry her. I should have taken someone out of my own country, in the first place, I reckon. But Marcy keeps knifing me. This time it's her divorce. 'Lena's people go by the *padres* and the *padres* have a law against divorce—against remarrying after divorce."

Treadwell nodded. "Sit down, Marc. That's all right, too, although I think that girl's God is bigger than most rules. In the first place, Marcy's divorce hasn't cleared the courts yet and so isn't on record. It won't ever be. Marc, look—a *pelado* who didn't want to disturb you today stopped me on the street right after the ruckus this morning was over. He had a story. He'd come in over the ridge trail this morning. Well, I rode right out there, of course. That's why I was so late getting to Prentice."

Treadwell drew a long breath. "It was Marcy, all right. Must have been riding like the wind, Marc. Missed a turn and went over one of those obsidian cuts on the ridge. Neither she nor the horse could have moved after they hit the bottom. Must have been a sheer three hundred feet. I sent a wagon out."

Treadwell stood up and handed his parcel to Challon. "Here's her purse. Only personal thing she had with her."

Challon stared a long time at the door after it closed behind Treadwell. It was a curious feeling to be at last wholly empty of malice. He slowly undid the parcel. Marcy's small tooled-leather purse rolled from it, vaguely fragrant with her favorite scent. He twisted its snap open.

It contained only two objects. One was a worn silver dollar. Under it was a heavy wrought-iron key. The key to the XO house. Marcy had ridden away from the ranch for the last time with only these.

Challon rose stiffly and crossed to the window, staring out into the bright sunlight and tossing the key. Finally he dropped it into his pocket. He knew what he would do with it. It

was a symbol. A gold chain for it now, so 'Lena could wear it if she wished. Later, a lock on the door of a new house on the XO, made to fit it.

Suddenly he was no longer weary, no longer empty. Suddenly he couldn't wait for 'Lena to return from her errand. He wanted to find her, meet her. He wanted her to know what a Challon's love could be when the barriers were gone. He didn't believe he knew himself, yet. He wanted to share the discovery with her.

He turned to the door of the room and swung it widely open, stepping through it with the stride of a big and impatient man.

"Water on three thousand acres east of the house, first. Only a beginning—"

Afterward, Challons forever on the grass of New Mexico as well as under it— Challons with the sun-dark skins of the clean blood of the land.

THE END

ONE WAY TO KEEP A CONTRACT

THE wagon masters in the Santa Fe trade were men who could search the soul of an ox, or a bullwhacker, with blue-light language at forty paces and get results. They also knew their business.

For this reason, they did not start their great high-sided prairie schooners west from Fort Leavenworth until the grass had greened enough each spring to support their motive power. This generally came about mid-May, and any damn fool knew it was useless to start west before grass time. That is, everyone did except a certain blue-bellied, brassbound Army quartermaster major who was trying to make a name for himself after the Civil War shooting had stopped.

From the that-time equivalent of the Pentagon Building, this quartermaster issued an edict that all Army contracts for westward freighting should specify starting-time as not later than mid-April—a full month before grass, as any plainsman knew full well.

There was considerable agitation and strong language when this contract proviso became official at Fort Leavenworth, but Army contracts were lucrative and the wagon master agreed to make their start at the specified time. The major back in Washington took great credit unto himself, after the fashion of quartermasters, and decided on a personal tour of inspection to see how his contribution to western transportation was working out.

He reached Fort Leavenworth early in May and was justifiably impressed to learn that the freight caravans had left there before the specified deadline. Securing a cavalry escort, he started west along the trail to check on details at first hand. The day and his journey were still young when he topped a little swell in the prairie, just three miles from the fort, and found the freight caravans comfortably encamped, waiting for the grass to green.

To the major's angry expostulations, the freighters made but one unanswerable reply—they had *started* at the time specified by the contract.

—OLD HUTCH

EVOLUTION *of the* STOCK SADDLE

By
Randy Steffen

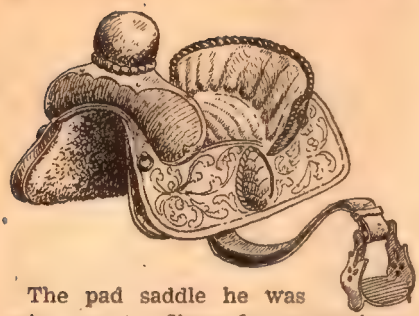
THE American cowboy's saddle stands apart from any other horse gear in the world. Developed over a period of three hundred years, the stock saddle we know and use today had its beginnings in the days of the Conquistadors.

Hernando Cortez, conqueror of Mexico, was the founder of the cattle empires around which the American West grew and flourished. It was Cortez's herders who first altered the heavy Spanish war saddles, unquestionably of Moorish influence, into the form we are familiar with today as the Mexican saddle.

The transformation from the heavy war saddle to the stock saddle was gradual, in a sense, but when compared with the evolution of other well-known articles it was quite rapid. In a remarkably short time the ways of handling cattle were completely changed from Old World methods to the saddle-and-rope ways we use on the range today. Gone were the *picas* (pikes for handling mean critters) of Old Spain; enter the rope-swinging, wind-splitting *vaqueros* of the Spanish *ranchos* in New Spain!

Specific information on the first changes in methods and equipment was not recorded for posterity, but the sequence of events is not too hard to deduce.

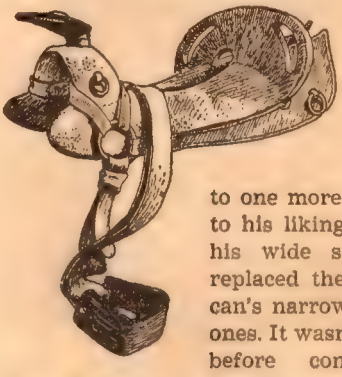
A *vaquero* on some Spanish spread must have accidentally formed a loop in a grass rope some Indian had made for him, and then impulsively tossed it over the horns of some cow critter that had split the brush ahead of his horse. When the critter kept going and the rope sizzled through the palm of his hand he began to look around for something to tie fast with. He had shown that a cow could be caught with a flying loop—now how to make use of this knowledge to lighten his work?



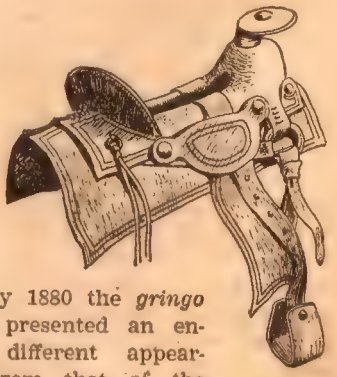
The pad saddle he was using was too flimsy for any such use as this, so he dragged out his old war saddle. Without much effort he whittled the high pommel down to a smooth round shape to serve as a snubbing-post. The high, deeply dished cantle was also cut down and sloped to allow quick dismounting. This new rig served well, but finally it wore out. Now he had to start from scratch on a new outfit, and with the craftsmanship he possessed it wasn't too long before he came up with the great grandaddy of the Mexican saddle of today.

The solid tree was cut down some and the ornate war-saddle skirts left off. The new tree had a strengthening light-rawhide cover, and the pommel was cut down to the familiar shape shown in the drawing immediately above.

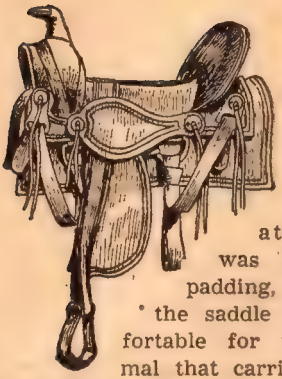
When the *gringo* invaded the Mexican range country, he adopted the Spanish ways of handling stock and the *vaquero's* gear—but not for long! Yankee individualism and ingenuity soon had his saddle taking on a different appearance. At first he was satisfied to cut down the "poker-table" horn



to one more suited to his liking; then his wide stirrups replaced the Mexican's narrow, solid ones. It wasn't long before considerations of comfort began to demand further changes. Skirts were added to the bare tree and side jockeys kept the Yankee cowboy's legs from chafing. Stirrup fenders *(rosaderos)* were still another innovation, designed to protect him further from the sweat of his mount.



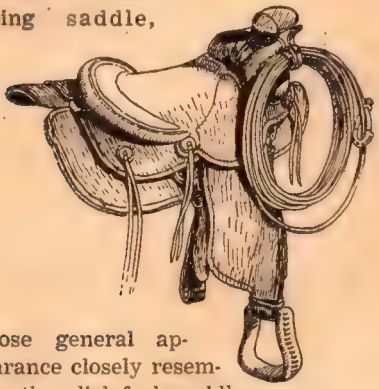
So by 1880 the *gringo* saddle presented an entirely different appearance from that of the Mexican rig. No part of the tree was exposed—skirts were full and more



attention was paid to padding, making the saddle as comfortable for the animal that carried it as for the rider.

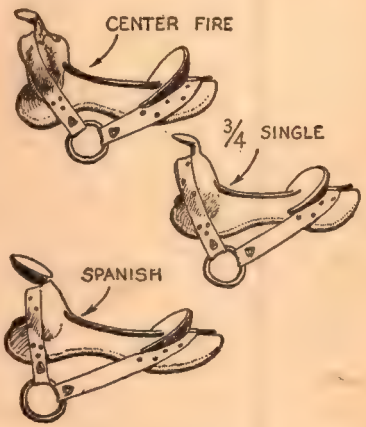
By now most of the cowboys preferred double rigs to the single cinches with which the saddles of earlier days had been equipped. The stirrups also underwent a change—from the wide "doghouse" type to the many different styles of narrow ones which we use today.

This is a modern roping saddle,



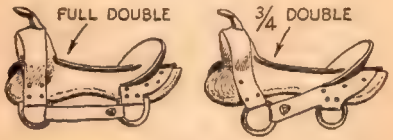
whose general appearance closely resembles the slick-fork saddles of the old-timers. There are dozens of different types used on the ranges today—from the roper to the wide-swelled, form-fitting bronc rigs. Each was designed for a specific purpose; essentially they're the same as the saddles in use a century ago.

The sketches below show the three single rigs most commonly used. The Spanish rig was used almost entirely until the "tie-hard-and-fast" Texans added the second cinch of the double rig. Californians still prefer the center-



fire, while the three-quarter single rig was most popular on the Northwest ranges.

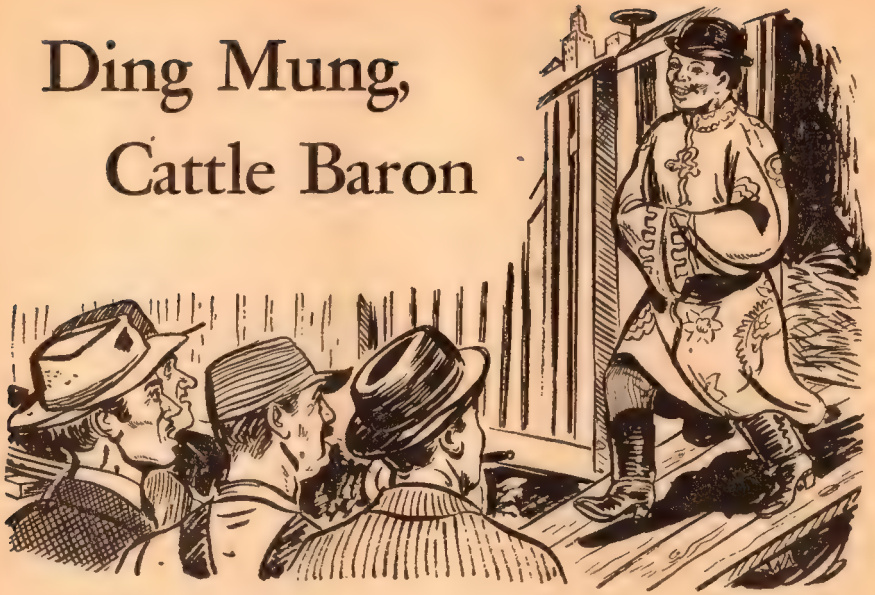
The difference between the full-dou-



ble and the three-quarter double rig is shown in the above drawings. The full double is still preferred in most parts of Texas, even though the three-quarter is less likely to gall the average horse back of the elbow.

In this observer's opinion, it is not likely that the stock saddle will change perceptibly from its present form and appearance. Function and design have reached a balance.

Ding Mung, Cattle Baron



By TOI KERTTULA and D. L. McDONALD

He wore a bowler hat over his queue and a brocaded robe over his work shirt—and ran a herd of monster steers that plagued all his rancher neighbors. A remembered tale of old Montana.

THE open ranges of the West produced more than their share of unusual characters, but probably none more unusual than the almond-eyed, queue-crowned Ding Mung, Chinese cattle baron of old Blackfoot City.

His few hundred head of longhorns, though a big outfit by west Montana standards at the time, would have seemed pretty insignificant if compared to the huge outfits of Texas and the Southwest. But then, who could expect a Gold Hills puncher to waste his time rooting fool cows out of the lodgepole pine thickets when he could burn the grease out of a skillet and go to panning gold at grass-roots level? Millions upon millions were taken out around Blackfoot City in just that way.

The big cattle outfits of western Montana were to come later, along with civilization, haying machinery, and "bobwire." There are more and bigger outfits in the area now than during the decades following the Civil War, when everything was free.

So, with a herd of about four hundred head, Ding Mung was well up in the forefront of the gold-country stockmen of the time. There were probably some other outfits that ran about as many cattle, but none could produce a comparable herd. They likely didn't want to!

Ding's steers ran to the size of Paul Bunyan's blue ox, Babe. In fact, some

of them may have been larger, for assuredly they were older than Babe ever got, even in legends. A choice few were well up in their teens and many others were "crowdin' ten." With age, they'd had time to develop every type of bovine cussedness and they made life an unmitigated hell to other stockmen for fifty miles around. Most of his neighbors' greeting to Ding would begin, "Ding, you ornery old heathen, them steers is busting down my haystacks"—or "my corrals" or "my waterin'-troughs"—"again. Why don't you sell 'em before they all die off of old age?"

"Me sell 'um, boy, me sell 'um. You bet!" Ding would assure them with a toothy smile and much emphatic nodding. But somehow, he never got around to it. From time to time a few ranchers would toy with the idea of rounding up his stock and selling it for him, but they never got it done.

The truth was that Ding did not know the value of his stock and had no reliable source of information on the markets. He hadn't made his money by listening to the advice of every crackpot who offered it, and he had no intention of starting now. The motives of anyone volunteering information or trying to buy cattle he viewed with grave suspicion—probably with justification!

Eventually, however, it became plain even to Ding himself that he'd better sell some of his huge old D-Bar-Lazy-S steers before they did actually die of old age. He decided to ship direct to Chicago where, theoretically at least, he'd get full value.

Chicago, accustomed as it was to the eccentricities of cattlemen, was hardly prepared for the arrival of Ding Mung with his hundred-odd head of mixed steers—mixed two-to-twenty-year-olds. Business at the stockyards came to an abrupt halt as everyone gathered to watch the big sleek one-tonners, their enormous horns turned sideways, come plunging out of the cars.

But the steers were only a curtain-raiser for what was to follow. Down the ramp trotted Blackfoot City's unique cowman; a smiling China boy with his half-cowboy and half-prospector outfit partly hidden by a flowing blue brocaded oriental robe. With a quiet gesture of friendship he removed his round bowler hat, revealing a neatly braided queue bound tightly around his head.

"Glood day," he beamed. "You want to buy some fine clows, you bet?"

The seasoned buyers and stockyard hands took another look at the "clows" and at their owner. Then they did the only thing they could think of. They sent for the newspapermen.

To the reporters, Ding was a godsend. News was scarce at the moment, and with a genuine Chinese cattle baron under their wing, they went to town. As each succeeding edition hit the street, Chicagoans vicariously fought Indians, hanged road agents, hunted rustlers, or risked their lives in wild night stampedes—all in the company of that incomparable frontiersman, Ding Mung.

Although Ding spoke English, after a fashion, like all his countrymen he could never master the letter "r" for which he unconsciously substituted the letter "l." This would not have made his speech too hard to understand, once you'd got the knack of it, if it hadn't been for the fact that at odd times he insisted on inserting his favorite letter where there was neither an "l" nor an "r." This the reporters

were quick to discover, and they started a special school for him, the purpose of which was to make his speech still more unintelligible. Ding was never allowed to eat two meals in the same restaurant, for the boys gladly bought his meals for the purpose of taking him to a new place each time.

Ding would smile innocently at the waitress and say, very softly and quickly, "Blaked halt, pliss."

"Would you please repeat that?"

"Blaked halt."

"But I don't understand."

"Blaked halt."

This went on until the waitress had an inspiration. "I'm sorry," she'd say sweetly, "we're all out of that today. Wouldn't you like something else?"

"Allight, Missy," Ding would reply politely and swiftly. "Loast bleef, blown glavy."

"I'm afraid I—"

"Loast bleef, blown glavy."

"What was that first one again?"

"Blaked halt."

"How can I take your order when I don't understand what you say?"

"Loast bleef, blown glavy! Blaked halt!" Ding's voice rose shrilly.

Conscious of the stares of the other patrons, the girl would turn back to Ding in desperation. "Will you please say that once more, slow? And please talk English."

This was Ding's cue. He'd leap out of his chair and roar at the now thoroughly alarmed girl, "I talkee English, you bet!" He'd pound the table with both fists. "Plain English, you bet. Loast bleef, blown glavy—blaked halt. Loast bleef, blown glavy—blaked halt!"

Then the whole crew of reporters would rush in shouting "Roast beef, brown gravy, baked heart!" and collapse over the table in a burst of uncontrolled laughter while the girl backed slowly toward the kitchen.

Though Ding thoroughly enjoyed the limelight, his personal affairs back in Blackfoot City began to demand his attention. Besides, the reporters insisted that he wear the huge pair of silver-mounted spurs that they'd bought for him and, since he'd never worn a spur before, those four-inch hooks were growing tiresome. He never removed them, even in bed, which naturally brought bitter complaints from the hotel management. A baron, the reporters claimed, was a baron and entitled to sleep in his spurs if he wanted to. They finally effected a cash settlement satisfactory to everyone but Ding, who never did learn to sleep soundly in the contraptions.

Reluctant to give him up before he had eaten in every restaurant in town and stayed at all the hotels, the reporters at last sadly agreed to the parting. They accompanied him to the station with a brass band playing cowboy songs, and they personally saw him enthroned, spurs and all, in the smoking-car in a manner becoming the owner of a Western empire.

But during his absence, Ding's empire had already begun to crumble. Perhaps if he'd started shipping his stock to Chicago a year or two sooner—who knows? At any rate, his method of handling stock had finally goaded his neighbors beyond endurance and the Green Meadows country had been leased out from under him. There was nothing to do but move his remaining stock.

Perhaps more out of curiosity than anything else, the whole neighborhood turned out to help Ding make his final —his only—roundup. When all the cattle were gathered, they proved a point

which had long been suspected. Though he still had more than three hundred head of cows, Ding owned not even one bull! He figured that others had bulls out on the range—why should he?

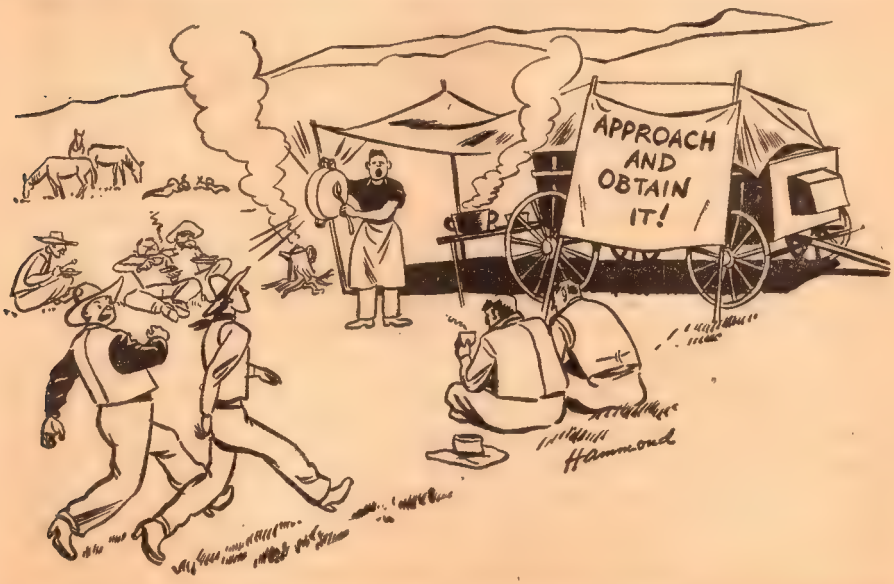
Ding shipped his cattle west to Arlee, which was definitely a mistake. The place was on or near the reservation and the sight of Ding's big old cattle quickened the blood of braves who mourned the passing of the buffalo. They took a new lease on life, mounted their favorite hunting ponies, and hit the trail.

Meanwhile, the squaws were not idle. One even succeeded in hauling poor Ding—literally by the queue—to the Mission altar. While the braves tracked down the last of his ancient steers, Ding's squaw cleaned up everything else he owned. The next year he returned to Helena minus cows, squaw, everything. There were no bands playing cowboy songs, no crowds to stare at him. He dismounted from the train at an almost deserted station. Shouldering his warbag, he started the long walk up into the town.

The first man he met on the street was an old panhandler whom Ding had staked to the price of many a beer so that he might enjoy the free lunch the saloons provided with their drinks. Now, when he saw the old man coming, Ding hastily turned his pockets inside-out, shrugged, and said:

"Tloo bad. One velly bloke Chinaman, you bet. One velly bloke Ding Mung!"

The empire of old Blackfoot City's Chinese cattle baron had fallen.



"Our new camp cook's just out of Harvard!"

Rimfire Cudd's sheepherdin' brother, Chewie, shapes up as a looney tick—until that amazing gold rush staged in Cowchip Gulch!

A "Paintin' Pistoleer" Yarn by Walker A. Tompkins

Loco Like a Lobo

YESSIR, it taken something powerful important to make Sheriff Rimfire Cudd's lunatic brother, Chewie, risk a visit to Apache-in broad daylight. Chewie runs sheep over in the Sacatone foothills, and a sheepherder is about as popular in a cow town as a busted beehive at a barn dance.

Chewie's rep for being teched in the head has made an outcast of the pore old coot, subjeck to being beat up by drunk cowpokes and pelted with clods by the kids around town, though Chewie was meek as a rabbit and allus minded his own business.

But in spite of bein' called loco and bein' made to feel as useless as an udder on a bull, Chewie Cudd shows up at the Bloated Goat Saloon one evenin' around sunset, actin' as excited as if a Gila monster had crawlt down his bootleg.

His brother Rimfire is roundsidin' with the boys, and when he sees Chewie push open the batwings and beckon for him to step outside, the sheriff bellers, "Go on back to your sheep camp, Chewie! You want somebody to lock you up in a loony tick asylum? Git!"

Well, Chewie knows his brother is a mite drunk, but his soft spaniel eyes sort of wet up pitiful. Suddenly he droops a horn and comes stalkin' over to the bar, smellin' of chigger medicine and sheep dip, and shakes a finger under Rimfire's purple nose.

"Jest fer that," Chewie bellers, "I reckon I won't let you in on the big secrut I brung over to 'Pache with me. It so happens I struck gold out in the Sacatones whilst I was diggin' a hole to bury a ewe the rattleweed kilt, and I rid over to town so as to let you stake out a claim next to mine. Now I'll keep the location to myownself, by crackies. You'll be sorry when I'm wallerin' in wealth up to my dewlaps. You'll suffer the torches of the damned."

Well, the boys bust out guffawin' at this kind of talk. Goes to show Chewie is plumb loco. Everbody knows the Sacatones is silver lode country, not gold. The only *oro* as was ever tooken out of them mountings was a teeny pocket that was discovered by old Salaratus Scraggins a few years back, and Salaratus cleaned that out complete before goin' over to Tombstone to retire.

Chewie takes this ribbing a little while, and then he fishes out a tobacco sack and pours a little pile of glitterin' yeller dust on the counter in front of Curly Bill Grane, the bartender.

"Thar's a sample I dug this mornin'," Chewie says, "an' plenty more whar that come from. Me own brother thinks I'm daffy, hey? Reckon I'll light a shuck back to my gold mine. Hasty lumbago, boys."

With which Chewie stomps outdoors to his hoss, straddles it, and vamoses in the direction of the Sacatones.

Well, it so happent there was some jackleg muckers from the Bonanza Syndicate diggin's in the Bloated Goat, and they take a gander at this dust Chewie had left on Curly Bill's bar.

"Might be the real McCoy, at that," allows one of the miners, nibblin' some yeller grains betweenst his molars. "Soft, not gritty like fool's gold. You reckoleck how old Chewie used to let Salaratus Scraggins have a mutton occasional, when Salaratus was prospectin' them foothills? You suppose Salaratus tipped off that old sheepherder to a bonanza?"

That made the barroom pert up its ears, right now.

"I'll soon tell ye ifn its gold or dross," speaks up Inky McKrimp, editor of the *Apache Weekly Warwhoop*, who is settin' near by astraddle of Queen Cleopatra, his jenny mule.

So sayin', Inky lifts up his wicker-covered brown jug of home-brewed bust-skull likker and sloshes some of same on the pile of yeller dust. Right off the varnish on the bar starts bubblin' an' fumin', the likker eatin' right into the mahogany. Or pine, to be exact.

"It's gold, all right!" hiccups the editor. "If 'twarn't, my Essense o' Tarantular Juice would a 'vaporated it by now."

The boys all crowd around, breathin' heavy. Lew Pirtle, who runs the Overland Telegraph, he says, "Somebody run and fotch Justin O. Smith from his studio. Smith is the only hombre in these parts who has eddication enough to tell if this is shore-enough gold, I reckon."

Clem Chouder the saddlemaker, he hikes over to his Longhorn Saddle Shop where Smith has his artist's studio, and comes back in a couple shakes with Justin O. Him bein' better knowed hereabouts as the Paintin' Pistoleer, on account of him being the champeen

pistol shot of Arizona Territory.

After the Paintin' Pistoleer has been served his nightcap glass of buttermilk, he has a look at the yeller dust. Finally he turns to Sigmoid Grubb, the town's medico, vetinary, dentist, barber, and coroner, and says, "Only sure way to tell is to test it with nitric and hydrochloric acids. You got the chemicals in your office to run an assay, Doc?"

Turns out Doc has the necessarys, and in full view of everbody in the Bloated Goat, Justin O. tests Chewie's yeller dust.

"No doubt about it a-tall, gents," Smith reports. "That stuff is gold. Worth sixteen bucks per troy ounce. You're lookin' at ten dollars' worth of *oro fino* right now. Where'd it come from?"

Nobody answers Smith. It got still enough in the saloon to have heard a sheep tick spit. Right off, Smith could hear the little wheels start spinnin' inside of men's heads, their eyes turnin' foxy-sly and their faces maskin' up indifferent, like a high-stake poker game when a man holds four aces and the wild card.

"Had a hard day today," yawns Plato X. Scrounge, the local justice of the peaces. "Reckon I'll hit the hay. 'Night, boys."

Before he can git out the door, Lawyer Scrounge is almost run down by Clem Chouder and Dyspepsia Dan of the Feedbag Cafe. Seems both of these gents have got sleepy all of a suddent, too.

That sleepin' sickness was plumb ketching, because before the Paintin' Pistoleer could finish his dram of buttermilk, he finds hisself all alone. Curly Bill Grane has scooped up the gold dust Chewie left on the bar and has skun out toward his stable. From all the gallopin' hosses outside, it seems the out-of-town cowboys and miners has decided to pass up their usual tiger-buckin' tonight.

Justin O. locks up the saloon for Curly Bill, and moseys over to the jailhouse. There he finds Sheriff Rimfire Cudd busy rollin' his soogans and packing some grub in his saddlebags.

"It might be a good idea if you paid your brother's sheep camp a visit tomorrow, Rimfire," the Paintin' Pistoleer suggests. "I got a hunch Chewie is going to have company, and where a gold strike is involved, he might need the protection of the law."

Rimfire grins grim. "Just what I'm aimin' to do," he allows. "I'll pertect Chewie's rights, you can bet on that. Us Cudds stick together. Allus knew my brother had a head on his shoulders."

Justin Other Smith returns to his studio and hits the hay. He wants to get a good night's sleep, on account of he's leaving before daylight on a jaunt to the west end of the Cheery-cow Injun reservation to paint some scenery for an almanac cover.

Next mornin' the Paintin' Pistoleer saddles up his palomino, Skeeter, and leaves town. He spends the next weekten days in the Dragoons country, slingin' paint, and he's forgot all about Chewie Cudd and his gold dust when he finally rides back to 'Pache.

Minute Smith hits town, he sees somethin' is serious wrong. There ain't a cowpony to be seed along the hull main street. Ever buildin' in town is locked up tight, or deserted. There ain't a solitary soul nowhere, not even Prunelly Fishman, who is fixing to have a baby name of Moe come February.

After scouting around for a spell, Smith decides that some mysterious disaster has made Apache as deserted as a Pueblo cliff-dwelling he painted onct when he was over in the Mesa Verdy country.

"Must have been a cholera epidemic," Smith decides, getting all goose-pimply as his boots echo offn the false fronts. "Apache is a ghost town, that's for shore—"

Just then the Wells-Fargo stage from Lordsburg rolls in and the driver heaves some mailbags onto the pile of sacks which has collected on the porch of Sol Fishman's post office and mercantile.

"What in thunderation has become of everbody?" Smith hails the jehu. "Boothill is lively in comparison to Apache."

The tooler pulls up his Morgans and gapes. "Where you been, Smith? Ain't you heerd about the big gold rush over in the Sacatones? Everbody in Stirrup County who could steal a shovel or a dishpan has lit out for Chewie Cudd's sheep range, to git in on the ground floor of a gold rush that will put the Californy boom of 'forty-nine in the shade."

Smith swallers a couple times, plumb flabbergasted.

"That's right," the shotgun guard speaks up. "Cowhands have quit their spreads in droves. Tinhorns floodin' in from Santy Fee and Tucson. Seems this gold strike is up on Cowchip Gulch. Ifn I wasn't stove up with the miseries, be damned ifn I wouldn't be up there with a pick an' pan myownself."

Well, the Paintin' Pistoleer batches for a couple of days, ketching up on his art work, but finally lonesomeness and curiosity gits the better of him. One morning early he slaps a kack on Skeeter and heads for the hills.

Late that afternoon he reaches Cowchip Gulch. He's been deer huntin' in this country and knows how wild and empty it was, but he wouldn't know it now. Along the south cliffs borderin' Cowchip Crick, human beans are busy grubbin' in the loose talus rock like kiss-ants, ever foot of ground along a five-mile stretch of the river bein' staked out into minin' claims.

The first prospector the Paintin' Pistoleer recognizes turns out to be Anvil Aggie, the three-hundred-and-forty-pound blacksmith from 'Pache, who married Dyspepsia Dan a few months back. Aggie has dug a hole in the side of the gulch you could have hid a beef herd in, and right now she's busy loadin' boulders into a bright red Conestoga wagon which is parked on her claim. The wagon box has a sign painted on it which reads *Bean Brothers of Bisbee.*

Helpin' Anvil Aggie dig is Dyspepsia Dan and his Chinee cook from the Feedbag Cafe, Aw Gwan. These three are too busy scrabblin' rocks to waste time explainin' things to Justin Other Smith, so he rides on a piece, gettin' puzzleder by the minute.

A few claims down the line he finds Lew Pirtle with his wife and kids, busy loadin' another Bean Brothers wagon with rocks. Smith notices that a steady stream of these red wagons, driv by Mexican teamsters, are plyin' back and forth betweenst the diggings and the bed of Cowchip Crick, dumpin' the tailings into the river.

The Pirtles are likewise too busy to tell Smith what's up. Finally, though, Smith locates one Apache citizen who ain't working. That is Inky McKrimp, the *Warwhoop* editor. McKrimp has

found hisself a patch of shade and is busy spoon-feeding Essence of Tarantular Juice to his jenny mule, Queen Cleopatra.

"Howdy, Justin," greets the editor. "Light and cool yore saddle. You've showed up a mite late, son. No claims left."

Smith is kind of dizzy with the heat and all the activity goin' on around him, which makes him tired just to watch. From muzzle to butt, Cowchip Gulch is jammed with Stirrup County prospectors.

"Beats anything I ever saw," Justin O. admits. "Anybody struck it rich yet?"

McKrimp chuckles. "Nobody so far, 'ceptin' Chewie Cudd. That old varmint waited for this crowd to show up, down at the edge of the desert. He wouldn't tell where he'd tapped his gold vein until folks paid him his price for a claim. Accordin' to these Bean Brothers, the mother lode is buried about forty foot deep under this loose talus. Soon as this overlayer of wuthless rock is moved, folks will be rich as Creases, accordin' to the Bean Brothers."

"The Bean Brothers?" Smith echoes. "Never heard of 'em."

McKrimp gurgles down a quart of his brew and burps.

"The Bean Brothers," he explains, "claim to be minin' engineers from who laid the chunk. They happent to be fishin' in the gulch when Chewie made the discovery strike in a sheep grave. They seen he had a good thing, so they bought out the Arizona Freight Lines fleet o' wagons over in Tombstone, and rent 'em to folks to carry off their surface rock in."

The Paintin' Pistoleer scratches his jaw thoughty-like.

"How come you ain't digging your share?" he asks McKrimp.

Inky looks mournful. "Didn't have the price of a claim, son. I offered Chewie a year's subscription to the *Warwhoop* and five gallon o' fresh-made Tarantular Juice. But it seems Chewie cain't read, and he cain't stummick my likker, so he wouldn't do business unlessn I deeded Queen Cleo over to him, includin' packsaddle. What does he think I am? This mule is people to me. Yessir."

Well, Smith sashays over to the Discovery Claim No. 1, which belongs to Chewie Cudd, nacheral. No diggin' has been done here that Smith can see, but Chewie Cudd is already a wealthy man.

The old coot has set up a big tent in front of a natural cave in the cliff, said tent being Jim Groot the banker's price for a claim. Both the cave and the tent are overflowin' with loot.

Smith sees where Curly Bill Grane has furnished six bar'ls of beer and a few cases of imported Blue Bagpipe scotch whisky. Sol Fishman's O.K. Mercantile has ponied up a ten-year supply of eatin'-tobacco, bales of shirts and overhalls, and a gas lantern. Samanthie Coddlewort has give Chewie her antique four-poster bed complete with feather tick and soogans, and Dyspepsia Dan has donated a wagonload of canned grub and a hunderd pounds of coffee.

There is twelve pair of cowboots from the Longhorn Saddle Shop, a couple tons of hay from the Mare's Nest Livery Barn for Chewie's pony, a medicine chest and barber pole from Doc Grubb, and a brass tuba horn from Lawyer Scrounge. Besides several ton of other brick-a-broke too numerous to size up in one day's lookin'.

"Yessir," Smith says, "for a sheepherder who never had as much as two pesos to jingle in his jeans, Chewie is doing all right. Being loco ain't a handicap in a gold rush, that's evident."

He spots Chewie settin' in front of his tent on a hosshair sofa, which Smith remembers having seen in Missus Spetunia Pirtle's fancy settin'-room in Apache. Every underdog has his day, and Chewie has shore come up in the world. He's sportin' Jim Groot's silk top hat, Lew Pirtle's swallertail coat, and Heck Coddlewort's prized set of false teeth.

When the Paintin' Pistoleer climbs offn his palomino, the old sheepherder takes him into the tent and interdooces him to a pair of seedy-lookin' galoots who are helping him get rid of his stock of whisky.

"These are my pards the Bean Brothers, minin' engineers from Bisbee," Chewie brags. "Blackeye, here, is from Boston. Cap'n Bean here was formerly of the U. S. Navy, one of a long line of famous navy Beans. Pards, meet Justin Other Smith, the only jasper in the town of Apache who ever treated me civil."

After Smith has shook hands with these two tinhorns, he says, "I'm surprised you gentlemen didn't stake out claims in this gulch before Stirrup County folks beat you to it."

Blackeye, the former Boston Bean, he chuckles. "We're satisfied to furnish the wagons which keep folks from buryin' theirselves under mountains of wuthless tailin's," he says modest like.

The Paintin' Pistoleer tugs his ear lobe, the way he does when hé smells somethin' fishy goin' on.

"How much dinero," he inquires polite, "do you charge these folks for the use of your wagons and teams?"

Cap'n Bean snickers. "Not a red penny, my friend. The deal is, we git one percent of any gold which these folks dig up when they uncover the lode. No gold, no pay for our wagons. Which is right generous of us, because they'd otherwise have had to lug their rock down to the river bottom in wheelbarrows."

Well, next day Justin O. scouts up and down the gulch, and finds plenty of sign that folks are gittin' discouraged. Some of 'em try to sell him their claims at any price; but the Paintin' Pistoleer ain't interested a partickle.

He remembers how his friend Salaratus Scraggins, the prospector, had told him that Cowchip Gulch didn't have the right geological formation to bear gold, and Salaratus ought to know, havin' spent seventy-odd years at the game before he retired. One thing shore, nobody except Chewie Cudd had found a speck of color up to now, although they had moved enough rock to form a dam acrost Cowchip Crick, which was already beginnin' to force its waters to back up into what eventual would become a lake.

Around ten o'clock, a big ruction takes place which draws everbody to Claim No. Seven. Seems Plato X. Scrounge has come acrost a little pocket of free gold, which the Bean Brothers weigh on a set of scales they had johnny on the spot.

"Lawyer Scrounge has dug out ten ounces of gold and nuggets," Blackeye announces. "That'll net him a hundred and eighty bucks at any Wells-Fargo branch."

This strike of Scrounge's made the folks who had been moanin' about their backaches the loudest go back to their claims and start diggin' like

hound dawgs burrowin' in a butcher wagon.

Well, the Paintin' Pistoleer suddenly turns up missin', although nobody noticed it. He is heading for Tombstone, to track down one of his famous hunches. On his way acrost the Sacatones, he drops in for grub at the Bonanza silver mine, a long-established outfit, and has a chat with the foreman of the reduction mill. This hombre agrees with Salaratus Scraggins that there ain't no gold vein in Cowchip Gulch a-tall.

Smith says casual like, "Don't Bonanza depend on the water from Cowchip Crick to keep your hydraulic rigs running?"

The foreman winks. "Shore. Best thing that could happen would be them fools to dam the river with their tailin's and build a reservoir we could tap summer or winter, regardless of dry years, to keep our monitors washin' gravel."

Justin O. gets to Tombstone the next day. A little snooping around reveals that the Bean Brothers of Bisbee had bought out the Arizona Freight Lines lock stock and bar'l, paying for forty-odd Conestoga wagons and teams to match with gold dust.

So far, so good. The Paintin' Pistoleer's next visit is to the little frame shack on Tough Nut Street where his prospector friend Salaratus Scraggins lives. But the shack is empty. A Mexican goatherder next door tells Smith that Salaratus has been gone six-seven months into the badlands on one of his prospecting expeditions, this time with a couple of partners who grubstaked him.

"That's funny," Smith says to himself. "When I was painting Salaratus's portrait for a magazine publisher last year, he told me he had saved enough gold to quit workin' for keeps. And he never traveled with partners, always lone-wolfed it."

With that puzzle pryin' on his mind, the Paintin' Pistoleer lit a shuck over to Bisbee town. Only thing he could learn about the Bean Brothers in that minin' camp was that Blackeye was notorious for beatin' up his *mestizo* wife, Rosario, who lived down in the Brewery Gulch part of town.

Smith decides to look up Missus Bean. When he locates her residunce, a frowzy-lookin' halfbreed woman comes to the door, her face covered with old bruise marks. She's actin' as scairt as a shoat in a slaughterin'-pen, thinkin' it was her husband come home drunk agin. Right then the Paintin' Pistoleer decides it's fair enough to do a little bluffin'.

"I am a U. S. Marshal, Missus Bean," he says, tipping his John B. "I have reason to believe that your husband killed Salaratus Scraggins of Tombstone and buried him on these premises. Mind if I dig a few holes?"

At that, Missus Bean keels over in a dead faint. Smith revives her with some water from an *olla* hangin' by the door. Soon as she comes to, Missus Bean starts whimperin'.

"Blackeye didn't do it," she says. "It was that pizen-mean brother of his who tortured pore old Scraggins to death to make him tell where he had cached his gold. That's gospel, Señor."

The Paintin' Pistoleer looks serious, like he don't believe her.

"Assuming Captain Bean killed Scraggins, where'd he bury him?"

Missus Bean thinks awhile. "Reckon I'll talk," she says finally. "I don't owe Blackeye nothin'. All he ever done is get drunk and beat me half silly. He

got drunk one night and let slip that Cap'n buried pore old Salaratus up on Thunderbird Peak—"

Missus Bean goes on like that for quite a while. Finally the Paintin' Pistoleer leaves, after slipping a gold piece where she'll run acrost it. He heads straight for Cowchip Gulch.

When he gets there, a couple days later, he finds the Apache people diggin' halfway to China, keepin' the Bean Bros. wagons hard pressed to lug rock over to the crick and dump it.

It seems that while Smith was away, Heck Coddlewort and his woman Samanthie struck a little pocket of gold dust, just as they had dug to bedrock and was all set to quit and go back home.

The Paintin' Pistoleer drifts along the claims, droppin' a hint here and there to his friends, who prompt quit work and tag along. When Smith reaches Chewie Cudd's headquarters, there is quite a passle of Apache folks with him, lookin' mad as hell.

Chewie and the Bean Brothers are busy swillin' whisky out front on their sofa when the Paintin' Pistoleer reins up.

"Well, what's this?" hollers Blackeye, standing up and waving a bottle at the assemblage. "Don't give up on the verge of riches, folks. My brother and I have been doin' some engineerin' work and we figger you're all within an ace of uncoverin' the mother lode that Scrounge and the Coddleworts have already tapped."

Justin Other Smith drawls in that soft Alabama way of his, "I located a buzzard-picked skeleton up on Thunderbird Peak yesterday, Captain Bean. It was wearing Salaratus Scraggins's boots. Know anything about it?"

The Bean Brothers go pale as bar rags. The Paintin' Pistoleer shifts slanchwise in his saddle and goes on slow and easy like, "If you murder a man for his gold, Captain Bean, you hadn't ought to let anyone know you did it. Even your brother. Too much risk he might get drunk and tell his wife. And his wife might have reasons for wanting to see Blackeye hung along with you."

Cap'n Bean stares at Smith like he's hipmitized. Then he whirls on Blackeye like a strikin' rattlesnake and bellers, "Blab to Rosario, would yuh? Lay the blame on me, would yuh? By grab—"

That's as far as the Cap'n ever got. Blackeye whups out a six-shoot gun and plugs his brother betwixt the eyes, instantaneous convertin' Cap'n Bean into a customer for Coroner S. Grubb.

Then Blackeye swings his gun around for a shot at Justin O. But the Paintin' Pistoleer didn't earn the title of the Territory's champeen deadshot gunslinger for nothin'. His little .32 on a .45 frame was out of leather like magic, and his first slug parts Blackeye's hair down the middle and drops him like an axed tree.

This shootin' fracas woke up Sheriff Cudd, who was nappin' inside the tent, and he come bustin' out to stumble over the Cap'n. Justin O. turns to his goggle-eyed friends and says:

"The Bean Brothers enticed old Salaratus Scraggins to go out to Thunderbird Peak last winter and inspect some quartz they thought might be gold-bearing. They tortured the old man into revealing where he'd hidden his lifetime accumulation of gold, under the floor of his shanty over in Tombstone.

"With that gold, they invested in

these Conestoga wagons. What little dust they had left over they used to salt the 'mine' which Chewie Cudd dug when he went to bury a dead ewe. The same dust was used to salt the holes that Lawyer Scrounge and Hector Coddlewort dug, just to keep you folks movin' rock to the river."

When the pantymonium had died off some, Jim Groot the banker wants to know, "But what did the Bean Brothers stand to gain by this hoax? A fake gold rush wouldn't help them unlessn we struck a real vein and paid them one percent for the use of their wagons—"

The Paintin' Pistoleer p'inted off down the gulch to where Cowchip Crick was backing up into a lake behind the rock dam these folks had built with their sweat and muskle.

"The Bean Brothers didn't have enough gold to hire the army of workers it would take to build a dam and convert Cowchip Gulch into a reservoir," he explains. "They had filed legally on the water rights of the crick, and aimed to lease water to the big silver mines for hydraulic purposes. In a few years they would have been millionaires, because the Bonanza Syndicate can't exist without water for their monitors. In other words, the Bean Bros. made unsalaried slaves out of every one of you."

As it was, the Sacatone silver companies had themselves a ready-made reservoy free of cost. That must have tickled Curly Bill Grane, because he gives out with a loud guffaw.

"Reckon this exercise ain't done ary of us any harm," he says, rubbing the flat spot where his beer belly had stuck over his belt two weeks ago. "Let's load our gear into them wagons, folks, and hightail it back to 'Pache where we belong. We'll drown our grief and ease our backaches at a big free-for-all open house at the Bloated Goat, the rest of this week."

Everbody grins but Lawyer Plato X. Scrounge.

"Reckon we'll take back this exhorbitant tribute Chewie Cudd extorted from us under false pretensions, *et ux*," Scrounge says. "I fer one don't aim to be outfoxed by no half-wit—"

Justin Other Smith twirls his six-gun around his finger and says to Scrounge, "On your way, friend. Chewie didn't guarantee gold in those claims, remember."

Well, Sheriff Rimfire Cudd starts braggin' about how it was him who busted up the hoax, proving same by slapping his handcuffs on Blackeye, who is still unconscious.

The Paintin' Pistoleer lets the sheriff strut and hawg all the credit he wants. He just moseys into the tent where old Chewie is sizing up his haul, enough to keep him in solid comfort for years to come.

"You old rascal," Smith chuckles happily, "I notice you haven't dug a shovel into the ground since this gold rush started. Folks have been calling you crazy, have they? You are—like a fox. Yessir, you're loco like a lobo, Chewie, and I'm glad for you. This proves the meek shall inherit the earth—without having to shovel it."

The old sheepherder sprawls hisself out luxurious on his four-poster bed, quite a novelty for a feller who has slept on a saddle blanket on the ground for sixty-odd years, and reaches in his pocket for the store teeth he talked Heck Coddlewort out of.

"You allus treated me like an equal, Justin," Chewie says sober like, "so I'll let you in on a secrut. I seen the

Bean Brothers plantin' gold in that hole I dug, when I was off fotchin' that dead sheep to bury. Knowed they was up to no good. That was why I rid down to Apache—to git my sheriff brother to arrest them varmints. But when he hoorawed me for a loony tick in front of everbody, I decided to play my cards like they was dealt."

Chewie knocks the neck offn a twenty-dollar bottle of champagne and has hisself a snort.

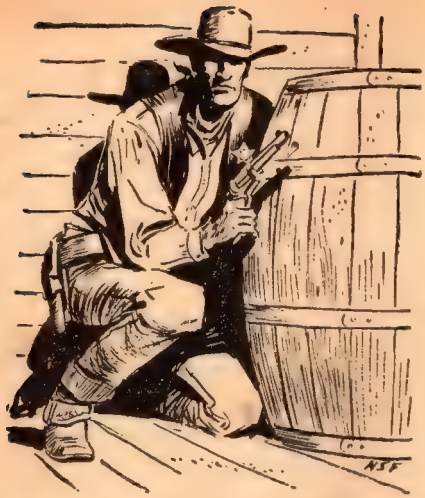
"Beats sheepherdin' forty ways from the jack," he admits, and grins with Heck Coddlewort's teeth.

On him, it looked good.

The Flat-Bellied Breed

By S. OMAR BARKER

THE COWBOY likes his vittles just as well as any man;
He's partial to his stummick, and he fills it when he can
With beef and beans and biskits and such other kinds of fare
As cow-camp cooks know how to fix out in the open air.
He ain't no hand for diets and such folderol as that;
He's sure a hearty eater—but he never puts on fat.
At least I've been a-lookin' at this breed of ridin' men
Since I was just a button, and I can't remember when
I ever seen a cowpoke of the cow-ranch workin' sort
That wore a bulgin' belt line, whether he was tall or short.
In fact, I'd say the cowboy on his cattle-workin' hoss
Is the flattest-bellied specimen you'll ever come across.
It ain't because this hombre lacks a lusty appetite,
For when it comes to vittles, he'll eat everything in sight.
But when it comes to fleshin' up like city fellers do,
You just don't often see it on a Western buckaroo.
He may be young and salty or he may be up in years—
His figger stays as lanky as an old-time longhorn steer's.
The reason ain't no mystery to them that know the breed,
Why buckaroos don't tote no lard in spite of ample feed:
Some fat wears off on saddles and some more gits jolted loose
By the meat-massagin' motion of a gallopin' cayuse.
But mainly here's the reason, and upon it you can bet:
The hired-man-on-hossback ain't afraid of honest sweat!



Dead Man's Gun

By
W. LEE HERRINGTON

Dad Sweeney laughs when the road agent takes the mail sack and scorns the strongbox, but the masked man has his reasons.

HE SLUMPED in the saddle, bone-tired with the waiting. When the first faint sounds of trace chains told him the Blue City stage had passed through the jaws of Karne's Pass and was reaching for the flat road of the valley, he licked a wetness onto his lips.

The four-horse rig was running lightly. With a hand that was big-knuckled, the rawboned man loosened the single belt gun that he wore and let it drop back of its own weight. Using only his sense of touch to examine the carbine, he raised it from its boot and laid it across the saddle in front of his legs.

He did not bother to raise the bandanna to cover his face until the light stage was fifty yards away. Even then he rode out slowly, the rifle barrel tilted upward at a sharp angle.

The single shot from the rifle echoed flatly against the night. The command was a single word, pried from his leathery throat:

"Hold!"

Slamming brakes trapped sand against the tires and made scuffing sounds. When the traces slacked, the driver made no attempt to take up the short-barreled sawed-off shotgun lying close to his leg. He raised one hand promptly without seeming resentment, as if the halt was only another hurdle keeping him from a hot meal and a cool bed.

"Sweeney?" The voice was muffled behind the red bandanna.

"Yeah, I'm Sweeney."

"Throw it down!"

Sweeney's hand lowered reluctantly, folding over the iron handle of the Wells-Fargo box.

"No!" The voice was a bark now. "Never mind that stuff—throw down the mail sack."

Sweeney paused, humped over a little, his eyes measuring the bandanna-covered face. "Brother," he began cautiously, "you sure as hell don't want—"

"The mail sack. Hurry it up." The big black horse was pulled around broadside now.

Sweeney straightened and shrugged. He reached behind him and hefted the

thin sack with the lettering daubed across it: U. S. MAIL. He threw it in a thrust that made it sail flatly toward the darkly dressed man. It fell against the waiting left hand.

The masked man caught the sack deftly, rode close to the stage, and motioned with the Winchester. "Drive on," he said curtly. The black horse lowered his haunches, pulling back slowly under the tight rein.

Sweeney spread his lines expertly, letting his dusty foot come off the brake pole while he made clucking sounds. The man with the Winchester turned the dark horse slowly, with the movement of the stage away from him, watching it wheel up dust. He lowered the bandanna, swung the mail sack around behind him, and tied it with a length of rawhide.

He looked up quickly, hearing the unexpected sound above the rattle of trace chains.

Sweeney's laugh carried back clearly and now he laughed again; a raucous peal of contempt. Then riding over the sound of his laugh came the flat sound of the slap of leather reins against horsehide. A scrap of moon showed boldly over Karne's Pass, yellowing the dust behind the Blue City stage.

Jim Bronson ran a rough hand over the stubble of beard on his weathered face and let the black horse prance down Stark Junction's single street. He glanced at the board sign on the narrow room that housed the sheriff's office, let his eyes sweep over the two-storied hotel building and on up to where Main Street was a dead end against the jutting building of *Wentsal & Stark Stage Lines.*

Bronson reined in, squinting at the low building with the square block letters on the window glass: U. S. MAIL. He dismounted, long legs moving with the easy grace of soft copper wire uncoiling. He was a man of not more than thirty; but wind and weather had collected overpayment, charging a narrowness to his eyes, layering his seamy lean jaws with leathery skin. Now he tucked the rolled canvas under his arm, tied the black loosely, and crossed the wide wooden sidewalk.

Inside the building his eyes adjusted slowly to the dimness, seeing finally the proportions of a general store, the narrow iron grating over a window. He paused at the door, letting two men pass him, and grinned his answer as they both spoke curtly.

The taller, solemn man of the pair was neatly shaved; his white shirt was of costly cloth under the dark, long coat. He wore shoes, in contrast to his companion's dusty boots, rough trousers, and nondescript vest that did not close enough to button over his low-hanging paunch.

Bronson waited until an aproned woman had bought stamps, tongued them liberally, and used her thumb to press them against letters. She handed them to the dark-haired girl behind the wicket and turned away, giving Bronson a polite half-smile. He touched his hat, eyes coming back quickly to the window as the dark-haired girl spoke.

"Can I help you?" Her voice was alert and cool, like her eyes; fresh as a spring morning breeze.

Bronson jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "The two men who just went out," he said. "They would be—"

She smiled. "You must be really a stranger in town. The taller one is Homer Stark and his partner is John

Wentsal, together, they spell Wentsal & Stark Stage Lines."

Bronson nodded. "Thanks. Now, I'm looking for the postmaster."

The girl placed both small hands on the narrow ledge in front of her. "I'm the whole works—postmaster, clerk, janitor. And just plain Martha Sweeney in between times."

"Now, I wouldn't say you were plain, Miss Sweeney," Bronson said lightly and pushed the folded canvas sack under the wicket. "You're mighty careless with government property, though."

She unfolded the mail sack, her eyes sliding along the raggedness of the knifed slit, the gaping hole.

"Where did you get this, Mr.—"

"Bronson," he answered. "Jim Bronson. I was riding up this way from Junction City. There's a place out of town where the road narrows—"

"Karne's Pass," Martha Sweeney said. "The Blue City run was held up there last night and Dad was robbed of this mail sack and its contents."

Bronson said slowly, "When I saw this sack, I guessed something like that had happened. The road agent must have gutted it there. I took a look. There's three scrawny-looking letters still in the sack."

Martha Sweeney said quickly, "Will you wait here, Mr. Bronson? Will you tell your story about finding the sack, to the sheriff? I can get him in a few minutes."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you could," Bronson grinned and shook his head. "If your sheriff wants to see me about it, I'll probably be down at the hotel for a spell."

Bronson turned on his heel, clomping across the planked floor, feeling the girl's eyes on his back.

At the end of the street, a tarp-covered wagon moved slowly away from the stage platform and its motion tugged at the corner of Bronson's vision. He turned his head, his lips spelling out the name on the wagon: *Wentsal & Stark.*

Bronson pressed his thin lips together grimly and stepped down to street level, his big-knuckled hand loosening the leather of the black horse. The horse turned, following the tall man across the wide street, the skin of its sleek shoulder rippling as Bronson slapped it affectionately, tying up at the hotel hitchrack. Once more his glance strayed up to the dead end of Main Street.

A man had come out of Wentsal & Stark's office now and leaned indolently against a porch post, his hands busy fashioning a cigarette. He was tall of body, rail-thin and narrow-hipped.

"*Nevada Ellis.*" Bronson whispered the name to himself. He unbuckled only one of the saddlebags and swung it against his hip. Nevada Ellis! The gun slinger who had ripped his single shot into Ernie Kane, the Deputy U. S. Marshal, five days ago.

Inside the hotel Bronson wetted the short pencil against his tongue, wrote, and whirled the register back to the yawning clerk. "Going to be another hot one," he said and used his sleeve to dry his face.

The clerk nodded agreement, chewed his tobacco without movement of his lips. "Stayin' long?"

"Might. Then again, I might not," Bronson said pleasantly. "Depends."

"Number seven." The clerk used his thumb to indicate Bronson's route. "End of the hall."

"You got keys; which is mine?"

The clerk reached behind him, se-

lected a key without looking at it and dropped it close to Bronson's hand.

"Difference is the same, they're all alike. If you got a poke of nuggets or anything valuable, better go up to Wentsal & Stark's and put them in the safe. If you just want privacy, a chair tipped under the door knob is better."

"I'm traveling light," Bronson explained, "but I like privacy." He walked to the uncarpeted stairway.

Water stood cool in the chipped basin. Bronson set his jaw hard and guided the razor in its uneven struggle with the wiry stubble of beard. When he had scraped his face to a semblance of smoothness and doused the strong soap away with cold water, he made a cigarette and smoked it hungrily.

The sound of boots paused at the top of the stairway and Bronson's hand pushed out quickly to grab his shirt. The boots clomped along the hall and Bronson swung the shirt down over his lean belly, buttoning it over the fancy .44 Colt, with its deep engraving and oversized, engraved grips.

When the knock came clear and loud, he twisted the key and swung the door wide, his big hands spread away from his body.

Sheriff Couzen let his badge show plainly against his vest. His surprise was evident when Bronson said, "Come on in, Sheriff, I've been expecting you."

Couzen said, "The name you wrote on the register was 'James Bronson.' Your own?"

"I been using it quite a spell."

"The book says you're from Junction City. When did you leave Junction?"

"A while back."

"Where did you stay over last night?"

Bronson said easily, "Well, maybe I didn't stay over anywhere; I might have rode on through."

Couzen shook his head. "That your smoke-colored crowbait tied up in front of the hotel?"

"If you're askin' whether that eight-hundred-dollar biscuit-eatin' black is mine—yes."

The sheriff loosened the .45 in his holster, just resting it in his hand, not letting it clear leather. "You carry the stamp of a man who'd take mighty good care of his stock. You didn't feed or water when you rode in and you ain't been to the livery stable. Now that black is slick as a whistle. So say you rode all night, I say you're a liar. You're under arrest, Bronson."

Bronson shrugged. "You arrest a man in Stark Junction just for lyin'?"

Couzen put a hand behind him signaling to someone in the hall. Martha Sweeney walked behind Couzen, passed him on his left, and there was no timidity in her cool eyes as she looked at Bronson.

"Yes sir, Mr. Couzen," she said firmly. "He is the man who surrendered the mail sack. He is big and tall, like the man Dad described—there was only the moonlight, but—"

Couzen said, "Could be a sharp trick, Bronson, bringing in the mail sack to keep suspicion away from you, but again, maybe you're pretty stupid. Bein' government property you took, I'm holding you for a United States Marshal. You armed?"

Bronson said, "Yes, I'm armed." He half turned, using his head to indicate the gun and holster looped over a chair back. Couzen's eyes followed.

The lean man's left hand raked across his shirt front in a clawing motion, cloth ripping under his left index

finger. His right hand moved, flashing over and around the butt of the gun under his waistband. The hand swept outward and around with snakelike smoothness.

Bronson leaned forward, taking the sheriff's gun; tossing it on top of the bed. He smiled easily at the dark-haired Martha Sweeney.

"Don't guess the postmaster is armed?" She shook her head quickly and Bronson said, "You needn't feel bad about identifying me, Miss Sweeney. I don't carry a grudge over it."

"Feel bad!" Her eyes blazed. "Why, you big—"

Bronson grinned, watching her lips fumble for words. "If it will make both of you feel better," he said. "I'll admit right off that I held up the Blue City stage. I had to have that mail sack. I knifed it open, had my look, and stayed up on Karne's Pass last night."

Couzen said, "You're dabbin' your own loop around your neck with that story."

"Miss Sweeney—" Bronson was instantly serious—"what about the sheriff here?"

"What about him?" Her chin came up and out a little and Bronson found himself assaying her, liking her quick defiance and lack of fear of him.

"Is he honest? As a gauge, how far would *you* trust him?"

"As far as—" She paused, hunting a comparison. "I've known Sam Couzen since I can remember anything. He's kind and, yes, *honest.*"

Bronson said, "How many letters did you find in that sack?"

"Three."

Bronson smiled thinly. "My boss, down in Topeka is going to raise hell—excuse me, Miss Sweeney—for handling it this way, but I don't go in much for fancy plays, like Ernie Kane."

"Ernie Kane!"

Bronson took the deputy marshal's badge from his pocket. "My boss is Marshal Callaghan, like he was Ernie Kane's boss." Bronson lowered the gun, threw it on top of the bed close to the sheriff's old gun.

Light from the window caught along the fancy Colt's profile, making the engraving show plainly. On the wide, oversized grips a flaming-mouthed dragon spread long toes; the dragon's swishing tail wound sinuously around and along the gun barrel, pointing at last in a sharp-tailed flourish that ended at the silvery front knife-sight.

Bronson heard Couzen's quick intake of breath and behind him, the quick steps of Martha Sweeney as she trotted down the wide hallway toward the stairs.

"You've seen that gun before, Sheriff," Bronson said hoarsely. "That was Ernie Kane's gun. He was a kid who liked 'em fancy. I was in Abilene when I first heard about it. I've heard it different ways along the trail. Tell it to me again, so I'll know I heard it right."

It was a story always old—made new only by fresh new names. Names like Ernie Kane. A tale of men of steel or flint meeting for the first time and striking sparks with no seeming reason or explanation. Sparks that can quench only in the quick, final test—one man against the other to some deadly, bitter, and conclusive end.

"Nevada Ellis—" Sheriff Couzen said carefully, "—he's still in town because it was a fair fight. Your boy Ernie Kane had just left the hotel and walked across the street toward the Brass Rail Saloon. He didn't know about that loose board in the sidewalk that I've warned the boys a dozen times to fix.

Young Kane's boot hit that and he went down."

"You had warned him about Nevada Ellis?" Bronson asked.

"Not right then," Couzen explained. "Didn't know yet that he was one of Marshal Callaghan's boys, but it might not have helped. Kane was young and tough and he'd have tangled with Nevada sooner or later. As I see it, my bailiwick extends to the county line and what a man is or has been over yon is no business of mine. Sure, I know Nevada Ellis has been run out of Ellsworth, Wichita, and Dodge but he's kept right peaceable since he came here and went to work for Wentsal & Stark.

"Cal Sweeney, the stage driver, cottoned to young Kane and he spent a lot of time around Sweeney's, 'specially in the evenings helpin' Martha with the dishes, tryin' out the moon afterwards."

"Kane," Bronson said severely, "was sent here to look into the stage schedule of Wentsal & Stark."

Couzen nodded. "On this last day, young Kane fell on his face. That fancy gun there—well, it fell out of his leather and hit the walk. One of the grips snapped off the retainin' screw and there it was, broke. Nevada Ellis was just comin' out of The Brass Rail. Piecin' the story together by them as was there, Nevada had a good laugh, picked up the kid's gun and the grip, and handed them to him. No one heard exactly what was said but it got around town that Ernie Kane had give Nevada Ellis till sundown to get to hell out of town. On the face of it, looks like Marshal Callaghan just sent a boy to do a man's job."

"They met fair?"

Couzen nodded slowly. "Fair as you could want. I tried calming them down but it didn't work. Nevada said he hadn't challenged the kid—was the other way around. Ernie Kane told me to stick to sheriffin' and he'd handle his own business. They met just afore sundown, a little ways past the post office. Some say their shots went off together but that's all wrong. Ernie Kane got his gun out and that's about all. Nevada Ellis drilled him first shot. Kane's gun was in his hand, with the hammer still down."

Bronson took his foot from the chair he had rested it on while listening to Couzen's narration of the passing of Ernie Kane. He looked out the hotel window to the end of Main Street.

Nevada Ellis was flipping his cigarette into the dust, turning. The office door hid his back now.

Bronson opened his saddlebag, took out an army map, and spread it across the bed. His long finger traced across the soiled paper.

"Here's Stark Junction," he explained, "and off here is Blue City—Kirby—Marys—Booger Creek Ford. All those are on the stage route of the Wentsal & Stark Lines."

"You don't need any map," Couzen said. "I know all that country like the back of my horse's head. Every foot of it."

"Then you know how they're sayin' around the country that U. S. Grant is in with his thieving friends." Bronson shook his head gravely. "Now Ulysses S. Grant is honest—he's probably the most honest man ever sent to Washington—but he's a soldier. He's an army man and he knows that war is hell and it makes liars and thieves or hypocrites of most of us.

"President Grant just won't believe that his friends are crooked; that they

are stealing the country blind. Secretary Belknap has resigned, trying to stop a story of army graft, and right now there's a half-dozen politicians in Washington sweating, waiting for the blow to fall. They'll take down a couple of Post Office Department officials with them when we arrest John Wentsal and Homer Stark."

"For what?" Couzen's mouth slaked open in surprise.

"Wentsal & Stark have been robbing the people by accepting money for something they don't do. For years they have been paid to carry mail both ways on these routes, making a trip daily, with bulging mail sacks. Ernie Kane had just made his report—that trips were made once a week, and the mail sacks were mighty skinny. He was to arrest Wentsal and his partner, but he ran into Nevada Ellis. So Callaghan sent me."

"Makes sense, the way you tell it. You want any help in making the arrest?"

"No," Bronson said. "You might stand by with your Winchester for a few minutes when I go out. You got a good gunsmith here in Stark Junction?"

"Matter of opinion," Couzen said. "He's a mite bunged up. Shot himself in the thumb the other day, working on an old rimfire forty-one. His place is a couple doors down past my own place."

Jim Bronson tried the door of Dad Halpin's Hardware Store again, shook it, and turned away. At the end of the street, Nevada Ellis had come back onto the porch, stepping down to the street now, crossing to the hotel side, walking easily, narrow hips moving in a deceptive slouchy stride, hands hanging loose and free.

Bronson turned his back to Ellis, crossed the street, and ran a hand over the black's rump, stopping where the holster with the fancy gun hung loosely behind the saddle, across the saddlebag.

"Howdy, Bronson."

Bronson turned, seeing for the first time, face to face, Nevada Ellis. The stories he had heard were all true; that Ellis had eyes that were not hard at first sight. Hands that might have been a farmer's hands; hard and rough and strong. Only the faint threadbareness of his trousers across the lean hips suggested that he often wore guns. Nevada Ellis wore none now.

Bronson said, "Howdy, Nevada. Heard you were around these parts."

"That what brought you up this way?" The voice was soft and low, almost friendly. "Or maybe you're takin' up where Kane had to turn loose?"

"Depends," Bronson said and smiled.

Nevada Ellis said in a tired voice, "Thought I'd drop around and tell you I ain't never liked killin's, even when they were forced on me. I ain't young any more, either. But don't let that interfere with your plans."

"I won't."

Bronson's eyes matched up the dark, lined faced of the gun slinger with the beginning grayness in his straight black hair and heavy brows; the face with its almost hungry look and eyes that held only the ash of some earlier, younger fire.

Nevada Ellis said, "Couple of winters back, I spent a spell in jail with a man who knew a lot about keeping books. I learned a lot that winter and with what I picked up since, readin' and learnin', I've managed to work fairly steady, live peaceable and fairly

honest. At least," he amended, "till Ernie Kane came along. He had to have a taste of me."

Ellis paused, regretful. "Maybe I shouldn't have laughed when he went down and spilled out his fancy gun. But there it was, over and done and the kid tellin' me how long I had to clear out of Stark Junction. A man has to fight on those terms."

Bronson nodded agreement. "I heard it was a fair fight." He unlooped the fancy, engraved gun and its hand-tooled belt, holding it at his side. "It's not much past noon, Nevada. Think you could get your business cleaned up and see your way clear to ride out of town before—sundown?"

Nevada Ellis twisted his head in a tired motion. "No," he said flatly, "don't think I could. I guess you didn't understand me right. I'm gettin' old and this is my last stop. Nice town here and I don't even wear guns half the time any more. I'm not dressed for trouble now, as you've noticed." Ellis ran a smoothing hand along his lean hips. "But I figure I could get dressed for you in mighty short order." The quiet light went out of his eyes, forced back in him by his words.

Bronson said, "Grips on this gun were a little big for a kid like Ernie Kane, Maybe more your size." He tossed both the gun and belt toward Ellis.

Ellis caught the rig with one hand, his right lifting the fancy Colt, testing its balance. "Nice," he said. "Right nice gun."

"Maybe you can work it faster than Ernie Kane!" Bronson snapped. "Put it to work, Nevada."

Ellis swung the belt around him, closing the big buckle. "I was beginning to like being a bookkeeper," he said slowly. "Well, it's geting a little late for words, Marshal."

"Reckon it is, Nevada."

"How do you want it? Some signal? Each of us back away and go for each other, or do you have some pet trick to make a man draw first?"

"Play it the way it comes to you, Nevada," Bronson said easily. "Give yourself room, then start your favorite tune."

Ellis tensed, backing away. Bronson moved to the right, putting distance between him and the big black horse. Ellis let his hand relax, steadying for his famed draw. His feet moved a scant inch, left hip rising sharply.

"Both of you!" Sheriff Couzen's sharp command drew tightness into both men and their eyes went around slowly toward the sheriff's office. Couzen squinted along the barrel of his .30-.30. "Both of you keep your hands away from them guns or I'll drop the first one to reach. Nevada, unbuckle."

Nevada Ellis unbuckled the gun belt, let it drop to the ground at his feet.

"Sundown?" he asked quietly.

Bronson nodded.

Nevada Ellis said, "I'll be dressed properly next time, Marshal, and I'm figurin' on stayin'."

Bronson watched the lithe gunman walk to the dock of Wentsal & Stark and enter the office. Sheriff Couzen came across the street, his old .30-.30 trailing against his leg.

Bronson's face was grim. "Well, that's that. It tells us one thing. Nevada Ellis was ready and willing to use Ernie Kane's gun on me. Thanks, Sheriff, for stopping the show. Keep out of it from now on."

The deputy marshal unbuckled his gun belt and hung it on the saddle

horn. He scooped Ernie Kane's fancy rig from the dirt and buckled it around him. Then he walked slowly up Main Street to where it ended against the stage lines office.

The light was dim in the office of Wentsal & Stark. John Wentsal closed his watery eyes and his face paled. Then the redness came back into the thin veins along his nose and he spread his hands, his eyes blinking.

"You haven't made a mistake?" he asked.

"No mistake," Bronson insisted. "You're under arrest, Wentsal. As soon as your partner shows up, we might as well get started for Topeka." Bronson ignored Nevada Ellis, who had gone behind a low partition, his face partly hidden by a green eyeshade.

"Marshal," began Wentsal, "suppose I make a full confession—offer restitution—be a government witness. I don't know the exact amount we have—been overpaid, but my books will show—"

Bronson snapped, "My authority don't extend any further than bringing you in. Where is your partner, Stark?"

The light footstep behind him had escaped Bronson's ears but the quick light of hope in Wentsal's greedy, wet eyes warned him. A quick feeling of tension rose in him, knowing now that he was at the end of his trail. But when he turned, he held his hands wide, away from his body, hearing the quick, husked order:

"Turn around slow, Marshal—that's right, slow."

Homer Stark slid the fancy Colt from Bronson's hip, put his own gun back under his long-skirted coat.

Bronson said sternly, "That was a fool play, Stark. I doubt if either of you would have got more than two or three years for stealing from the government. But gunplay might make it different."

"The difference between laying in a stinking Federal jail, or pulling out and heading for Mexico, yes. I'm holding the difference. John! Open the safe, I'm pulling out."

John Wentsal shrugged, went to the big iron safe, and knelt, fingering the lock. He said, "They got us where the hair is short, Homer. I'm taking my medicine."

Bronson said, "He's right, Stark. Your partner can be cured in a few years with a stiff dose of jail. With you, it's different. I want you for *murder!* You found out Ernie Kane was a marshal's deputy. Did Nevada Ellis know you had it rigged so the kid didn't have a ghost of a chance?"

"Ellis drew on him fair," Stark said harshly.

"Did Ellis know you had bribed Halpin to—"

"Homer," Wentsal's eyes bulged now, watching his partner. "My God, Homer! You haven't got a chance. *That's Ernie Kane's gun!*"

Homer Stark's eyes flicked down to the fancy Colt.

Bronson said, "You're holding a dead man's gun, Stark. That's the gun Ernie Kane didn't fire. Which one of you bribed Halpin to file or grind down the hammer so it wouldn't meet the primer?"

Nevada Ellis got up slowly from the old desk, laying aside his eyeshade. Homer Stark jerked backward, throwing the engraved gun at Bronson's head. It struck his shoulder, bounding against his foot as it fell. He stopped in a half crouch, reaching for it.

Ellis was blinking in surprise, see-

ing Stark's hand beat him to the gun belt hanging on a peg by the door. The black gun came out and Stark was saying:

"Hold it, Bronson. Get back, Nevada, and keep out of this. John, hurry it up. Toss me that money sack. It's not much, but it will come in handy where I'm going."

Nevada Ellis kept his voice low: "So I went up against Kane without giving him a chance." He shook his graying head. "That was a dirty rotten trick, Stark."

Stark laughed bitterly. "I hired you as a bookkeeper, not a gun slinger. You wouldn't have gunned Kane in cold blood, so I had to rig it some way. Dad Halpin couldn't be bribed, so I dropped in on him after I heard he was repairing Kane's gun. The old fool was tickled to death to let me tend his place while he went home and put a clean bandage on that busted thumb where he'd shot himself. I even offered to deliver Kane's gun to him at the hotel. Before I turned it over to Kane, I ground down the hammer pin enough to make it worthless, and told the kid Nevada was achin' to get at him.

"Dad Halpin buttonholed me on the street a while ago and asked me about Cal Sweeney sending Kane's gun down to Marshal Callaghan and wanted to know why. But Halpin won't bother me any more. When I left him a few minutes ago, he had that old rimfire forty-one in his hand and it looks like he shot himself pretty bad when one of those old cartridges brushed-off. John!"

Wentsal turned, closing the safe, walked over to Stark, and handed him a thick stack of bills. Stark crammed them into his pocket, stepped lightly backward, and turned, running across the porch.

Nevada Ellis dived along the porch floor, hands making a futile grab at Stark's legs. Stark stumbled, turned, and fired one shot at Ellis. Splinters came up around the old gun slinger's face, then Stark was moving in a long-legged stride toward the horse barn.

Bronson knelt, recovered the engraved weapon, and ran toward the door, his eyes hunting Homer Stark. Bronson reached the end of the porch, stepped down, dropping behind the rain barrel under the corner eave. Stark sent two quick shots at Bronson. Bronson felt the pound of them against the barrel; the trickle of water against his arm.

Behind Bronson, feet pounded on the porch boards; now scuffing sounded along the street. Bronson cursed. Cal Sweeney was reining the light stage to a stop, off to his right. Stark pounded two more shots at Bronson and Stark's quick curses echoed along after the blast of sound.

Nevada Ellis was running now. He vaulted the hitchrail, foot stabbing at the hub of the stopped stage. His hard hand beat Cal Sweeney's quick movement toward the sawed-off twelve-gauge on the seat. Bronson swiveled his head. They had him quartered now, and he felt the short hairs rise along his neck. The sound of the hammers coming back on the shotgun was clear and crisp.

Ellis fired both barrels at once. Bronson heard a high hoarse scream off to his left, behind him. He had only a glimpse of the Winchester, pointed at Bronson's back, falling loosely, then John Wentsal was slamming toward the ground, both blasts from the twelve-gauge in his chunky body. Dust

made a cloud around him as he fell.

Stark rose from behind his porch shelter, dropping the gun he had begun the fight with. Bronson held the fancy Colt at hip level. He let it blast once.

Surprise flooded into Stark's face. He went down slowly to one knee; now both knees were in the dust, the skirts of his long coat dragging. Stark pushed the coat away, trying to lift the long-barreled gun at his hip. Bronson waited, the fancy gun hot in his hand.

Stark's shoulders drooped and his head lay forward on his chest. Then he plummeted onto his face.

The partnership of Wentsal & Stark had dissolved in the heat of violence and blood. Bronson approached warily, gun held tight.

Cal Sweeney got down off the box and from halfway down Main Street, Sheriff Couzen came running, his .30-.30 in his hand.

Bronson waited until Nevada Ellis had walked stiffly toward him, then he said simply, "Thanks, Nevada."

Ellis smiled tightly. "Never liked to see a man get shot in the back like Wentsal was trying to do—not even a marshal deserves to go out that way." His eyes dropped to the engraved Colt. "Thought that gun was supposed to be rigged."

Bronson smiled grimly. "It was. But they got gunsmiths down in Junction City, too."

"A fool play," Ellis said curtly. "Stark could have blasted you."

"I was playing with his conscience," Bronson said. "The minute he realized he had Kane's gun in his fist, doubt began to trouble him. He couldn't take a chance of finding out if it would fire or not, so he grabbed your gun." Bronson grinned. "I've heard how fast you are, Nevada, with a gun, so I didn't take any chances. I asked Sheriff Couzen to draw down on us, there in front of the hotel. I had to know if you was in on altering Kane's hammer. You ain't bad with a shotgun, either."

Nevada Ellis nodded and walked back toward the stage lines office.

Bronson waited till the sheriff was a few steps away, then went forward to meet him. He took Couzen's arm, steering him toward the board sidewalk.

"Let's see what shape Dad Halpin is in," Bronson suggested.

It was a little early yet for the moon and Main Street was dark. Bronson shook hands with Couzen and put his left foot in the stirrup.

Couzen said, "Can't always tell about these gunshot wounds, but Doc Haggar says Halpin will pull through. Martha Sweeney is a pretty good nurse." He shook his head. "Kind of had your trip for nothin'. You can't take Wentsal or Stark's body back as a witness against these Eastern crooks."

"You can't always take 'em alive," Bronson agreed. "But there will be some other way found to catch 'em up." He mounted the big black, looking down at the old sheriff. "Say good-by to Cal Sweeney for me, will you? And Martha. Especially Martha. Think I'll write myself a letter up here sometime, then ride up and get it."

Bronson pulled the black away and rode toward Karne's Pass. He stopped at the end of the street, looking back. No light showed in the office of the stage line.

A man's shape moved dimly against a wall. A match flared, moved upward in a short arc, then went out.

Ex-long rider Tom Lokum finds himself on a spot when his old owl-hoot pardners reveal a more than casual interest in the local bank.

PENSIONED OFF

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

EVERY Monday Tom Lokum received a plain envelope, return-addressed to a post-office box, in the stage mail. Every Tuesday morning he went to deposit the check it contained in the Talking Trees Bank. It was then President Durfin's habit to accompany him back into the office and check the weekly account of Tom's gunsmith shop and sporting-goods store.

Durfin knew that those weekly checks represented a pension given to keep temptation away from a man who had been a dangerous outlaw and, what was more, a terrific expense for years and who had not too long before finished a prison term. Carcajou Investigations, Inc., representing banks, stage lines, mines, and other potential holdup victims, had reckoned it cheaper to give Tom Lokum a substantial living than to pay out twenty times as much trying to catch him after he and his gang pulled a ten- or twenty-thousand-dollar job. Durfin was the only resident of the county-court town who knew about Tom's outlaw past.

As Tom left the bank one Tuesday morning, he glanced down the street and along the main trail leading into Talking Trees. Bounding along down the slight grade came a long-back Kentucky horse, carrying a youthful rider.

Sure-enough proud, Tom thought, noticing the nutria hat, the Pendleton-style shirt, custom-built boots, two-hundred-fifty-dollar saddle—and the pair of faded blue, patched waist overalls.

Somehow that rider seemed familiar. Tom puzzled along for a few steps, trying to place him.

"Why—Kid Rumpe!" he finally exclaimed aloud. What was he doing in Talking Trees? Where had he gotten such a horse?

As Tom watched, the rider turned to the tie rail in front of the Old Home Cooking Restaurant, diagonally across the corner from the bank, swung to the ground, and let the reins fall. Kid took a fat carrot from his shirt bosom and fed the horse, bite by bite, looking across the court square at the bank and then glancing back over his shoulder.

Then the youngster vaulted over the tie rail and walked, swinging, into the restaurant. Tom went back into his shop, where he stood watching.

Half an hour later Kid Rumpe emerged, folding money in his powerful hands and shoving it into his pocket, taking his time, picking his teeth, gazing from under the wide brim of that gray nutria. He mounted, rode the horse across to the pole in front of the bank, drew a wad from his overall pocket, and carefully unfolded a bank certificate.

Tom Lokum knew it was a century note, to be taken into the bank and changed into small bills while the customer took his time looking things over.

Presently Kid Rumpe strolled out, stepped up onto the pole and into the saddle, lifted the reins, and sent the horse on down the street into the valley road.

A few years had made a big change in the quiet, green-eyed lad who had grown up in an outlaw-hide-out badland range. He looked like some wandering cowboy, leaving one job behind, looking for another place to hang his hat. He rode with superb poise down the slight grade, proud, confident, minding his own business—which, Tom Lokum knew very well, was casing the Talking Trees Bank.

Tom stood by his window, breathing hard. The bank was chock-a-block with cash—the accounts of cattle buyers, mines, timber-belt men, the savings of thrifty settlers, hide and fur money.

Tom sauntered across the square to the sheriff's office. Burdock, the lawman, was just coming down the steps of the building on his way to lunch.

"Why, Tom, what's achin' you?" he demanded, peering at the gunsmith.

"The Badlanders have cased the bank, sher'f!" Tom tipped his head. "That feller liftin' the dust—Kid Rumpe, he is—and he *looks* like just a kid. He changed a century in the bank, took his time lookin' the whole joint over."

"Could be just a ranny that's been workin' and got paid off," the sheriff suggested.

"A range hand with a five-hundred-dollar horse? Why, that nag's good for a hundred mile in the next twenty-four hours! Blotted brand—nary a shootin' iron in sight. I tell you, Sher'f, he's one of them Badland boys!" Tom's tone was urgent.

"Could be, o' course." Sheriff Burdock shook his gray old head, eyes squinting with the effort of unaccustomed reflection. "'Tain't likely, though. Nothin' wrong changin' a big bill into small spendin' pieces. Done ev'y day." His eyes took on the suspicion of a twinkle. "But mebby I'd better 'point you deputy, eh, Tom?"

He chuckled at Tom's look of pain, and strolled over to the restaurant.

His knees aching as if old age had stricken him, Tom Lokum returned to his workshop. He did a little leather job on a saddle and oiled a clock with an eagle feather, then sat down in one

of the old armchairs which had been discarded by the Talking Trees hotel and which he had braced with heavy copper wire. He stared at the floor, feeling helpless.

If the lawman kept quiet about the warning he hadn't believed and the raid came as a surprise, Tom Lokum would be the first one to be suspected. Just when his little repair shop and sporting-goods store was really getting going! Chief Drenn of Carcajou Investigations, Inc., would be disappointed; they would stop the weekly pension check that was cheaper for them to pay than to have Lightfoot Bob, alias Tom Lokum, riding the Old Thief Trail, gone bad once more—costing more every year in loot and the job of hunting him down than the pension would amount to all the rest of the retired long rider's natural life.

But nothing happened, that afternoon or night, or the next day—or even over the week-end. Another check came Monday afternoon as usual, too late to get to the bank. That night, under pressure of a little rush in business, Tom worked late. Some of the boys dropped in to look, listen, and talk.

Just before ten o'clock the repair man shed his elkhide apron and hung it up. Simultaneously the loungers rose, stretched, and began to drift out. Tom stood a restful moment in the doorway before turning the key in the lock.

Then he walked slowly to the log cabin where he lived on the edge of town. He was still worried. He knew the Badlanders and their methods. Kid Rumpe had been sent in to look over the bank, the town and its streets, the ways of approach and departure. He sighed regretfully, thinking of the Kid.

The youngster had been raised in the certainty that he would be a rustler, a horse thief, a robber. Tom himself, as Lightfoot Bob, had been the Kid's idea of a hero, an example to follow—a big-time raider!

Feeling old and broken, he reached his cabin and pulled the rawhide latch string and thrust open the split-plank door. In the dark he crossed to the table, struck a sulphur match, and as the blue flame turned white he lighted his round-burner oil lamp. He heard a noise and turned around.

Five men were sitting in a crescent of chairs, each one of them with a short gun leveled and pointed at his belt.

"Howdy, Bob!" a high-pitched voice greeted. "How's tricks?"

"Howdy, Snake," Tom answered, his voice even. "Can't complain."

"Be'n wonderin' what the hell 'come of you," Snake Bingham complained. "Hidin' out, hey? Holed in—plumb comfy." He sneered. "A quitter!"

Tom shook his head. "No, I didn't quit. I took a ten-year course in behavin' myself—graduated in seven years, six months. I was worked over, trained down; I've gone to putterin'."

"Yeah. The Kid heah spotted yo' when he cased the bank. Say, that big box is crammed with green stuff, an' plenty o' yeller-backs! Reckon you've got the lowdown, too? Bob, we sure need you—you got getaway brains."

"Snake, my brains is why I'm not ridin' with you."

"That so?" Snake huffed. "Well, git us some supper, yo' damn spavined camp cook!"

Tom turned to the kitchen. He had plenty of grub on hand—venison, corn meal, potatoes, flapjack makin's, coffee, even an apple pie fresh baked—and he

soon had a filling meal served up to the five grinning men.

"Doggone, Bob!" Snake shook his head. "I neveh 'spected to live to see the day when Lightfoot Bob'd be limpin' around, broke-hoofed and wore out—a dough-goddin' cook! Sure tamed, Bob."

"I reckon," Tom assented. "Well, sit up, boys, and pitch in."

"Got any liquor, Bob?" a voice demanded.

"Talkin' Trees voted itse'f dry two, three years back," Tom said. "I don't reckon theh's even a drop left in the town."

"Hell of a place fer Lightfoot Bob to settle down!" someone mocked.

The visitors ate slowly. They had come a long way and none of them could remember a meal as good as this one—and served by a big-time outlaw gone cook! Oh, it was something to savor, all right.

But Tom Lokum was not deceived by their hearty, amused manner. He knew what to expect. Still, he opened some cans of berries he had put up himself, dished out some wild-grape jelly, filled a dish with hard candy from a big bucket, poured more coffee.

Every move he made was watched. Revolvers lay on the long kitchen table where the five wolfed their grub—fair warning that he was to watch his step, that his one-time pals did not trust him.

The bank opened at eight o'clock to accommodate early birds. Two or three cattle drovers were waiting for the doors to swing back to get beef cash. A mine super was out to get pay-roll cash and money for supplies. Across the street, Kid Rumpe leaned against the restaurant front keeping tabs while his horse stepped about impatiently at the tie rail.

Presently the Kid crossed the street slowly, his horse following. Two men tried the bank's side door and to their satisfaction found it unlocked. Two others followed the waiting patrons through the front door. At the back the big, formidable steel-front vault was open, its time lock having worked on the second.

As Kid Rumpe faced about, starting to draw his two revolvers from their holsters, he looked over his right shoulder—and there stood three men with leveled shotguns. He froze and let his guns sag back into leather. From within the bank he heard sharp, clear voices, one ringing out plainly:

"Hold it, boys! Stop right there! Make one move and a pound o' buckshot'll sink yo'! Snake, put 'em up!"

On all sides, emerging from alleys, looking from upstairs windows, advancing from doorways, were men armed with pistols and long guns, ready for business. The bank was alive with stern guardians of the peace. The four men who had come a-raiding, two of them carrying wheat bags, looked into the muzzles of more rifles and shotguns than they had ever seen before in their lives.

And coming from the restaurant, walking deliberately, was a rotund, round-faced, burly-shouldered man, his eyes sparkling, a smile twitching the corners of his mouth under the spread of his old-gold mustache. He carried no gun. He walked into the bank and up to Snake Bingham, who stood silent in venomous, hopeless surprise.

"Howdy," he said drily, unbuckling the bandit's gun belt.

"Why—uh-h—good mornin', Misteh Drenn," Snake stuttered. "Ain't yo' up

kinda early?"

"No, Snake—be'n up late. Watchin' yo' eveh since yo' visited Bob's cabin last night. Untied Bob afteh yo' left him gagged and roped and went fo' yo' horses. Sure good stock, Snake—that one o' the Kid's musta come straight from the Blue Grass."

"Yeah, two of 'em did, Chief," Snake nodded. "Who the hell squealed on us?"

"Nobody. Be'n tailin' you boys six months—figgered you'd about spent yo' money. An' now we got yo'—goin' to make us trouble?"

"Betcher life we are!" Snake grimaced. "Us fellers ain't done one damn thing heah! We neveh pulled a gun, said a word, ner done nothin'. All we wanted was to change two, three centuries fer spendin' money. I'll leave it to any o' these gents—them cattle buyers, that tall feller in laced boots—if they seen us do anythin' out the way, the least bit!"

"But Lightfoot—Tom'll testify diff'rent," Drenn declared.

"All there is to that's simple assault," Snake grinned, confident.

"Listen, Drenn, you played your hand too soon," declared a cunning-faced customer. "I'm a lawyer; not one of these boys committed an overt act here—I'll take their case!"

Chief Drenn of Carcajou Investigations, Inc., nodded.

"Well, come on, boys," he invited. "Let's go up to Tom Lokum's cabin. We'll talk things over. All five of you scoundrels are damn nuisances, individually and collectively, but I figure you've got some sense, even so."

The chief Carcajou herded the five desperados away from the bank and up to Tom's peeled-log cabin, where they all sat down in the living-room.

Tom was there, red marks on his thick wrists where the cords had bound them. One eye was black, where Snake had struck him a contemptuous blow.

The outlaw band, the pensioned long rider, and the detective chief gazed at each other for some moments in silence.

"We've got yo', Snake, don't think we haven't," Drenn finally addressed the head bandit. "What yo' got to say?"

"Listen, Chief!" Kid Rumpe blurted out. "I neveh had no education, no bringin' up—neveh had no chance in this damn world. Now what's ahead fer me—ten years in the pen! I ain't foolin' myse'f—you got us roped an' hog-tied.

"Lightfoot," he went on, turning to Tom, "that feed yo' put on last night—yo' actually be'n livin' thataway—all yo' want right along—afteh servin' time?"

"That's right, Kid. Diff'rence is, I got my chance *afteh* I spent my best years in the pen. Yo' can get yo's *before* you go up. Chief—" Tom turned to Drenn—"Snake and the others have done short stretches already. Have they got a chance?"

"Would you take the responsibility, Bob?" Drenn asked, his face grim.

Tom put it to them. "How 'bout it, boys? Yo' goin' to spend the rest of yo' lives on the run—*afteh* you've served yo' time? Or do yo' start now, goin' straight and workin' honest—paid a livin' to behave yo'selves, and earnin' yo' own luxuries? The chief heah braced *me* up."

Chief Drenn sighed. "You're talkin' me into a pretty little expenditure, Bob," he declared.

"It was worth it, in my case, wasn't

it, Chief?" Tom demanded.

Drenn nodded assent. "That pension of yours turned out to be earned wages, Bob." He looked at the others questioningly. "How 'bout it, boys? Like I say, it's good-behavior insurance money."

The five sat, licking their lips and blinking. They had been caught—and yet they had a choice left to them.

One by one, they nodded. How could they turn down a chance like this—a chance such as they hadn't thought could exist in a hard, unfriendly world?

THE "WEAKER" SEX IN THE OLD WEST

A Western Quiz

SOME GOOD, some bad, but all vitally alive, the gals named in the right-hand column below left their mark on the men and the history of the West. See how many you can match with the correct description as given in the left-hand column. Answers on page 123. Eight or more right means you know your women (tell this to your wife and give her a laugh).

1. The Comanches stole her when she was nine; Quanah, her mixed-blood son, became their last great war chief.
2. Old Calamity claimed to be Wild Bill Hickok's sweetheart, but she wasn't.
3. Third wife of an elderly farmer, she stayed with him to the death on a Western trail.
4. A lady wildcat of the Indian Territory and sidesaddle version of Jesse James, she died from an overdose of buckshot in the back.
5. She guided the first American exploring party to reach the Pacific Northwest by overland.
6. A lifetime professional gambler, known to impudent losers as "Madame Mustache."
7. The only woman on either side in the 'Dobe Walls fight, though not the only widow from that scrimmage.
8. She survived the massacre of her family by the Apaches plus five years of captivity to leave her name on an Arizona town
9. She was the belle of Taos at sixteen when Kit Carson married her.
10. Once unofficial Queen of Bavaria, her Spider Dance opened the pokes of California Argonauts.

_____ Eleanore Dumont

_____ Lola Montez

_____ Cynthia Ann Parker

_____ Olive Oatman

_____ Tamsen Donner

_____ Belle Starr

_____ Josefa Jaramillo

_____ Martha Jane Cannary

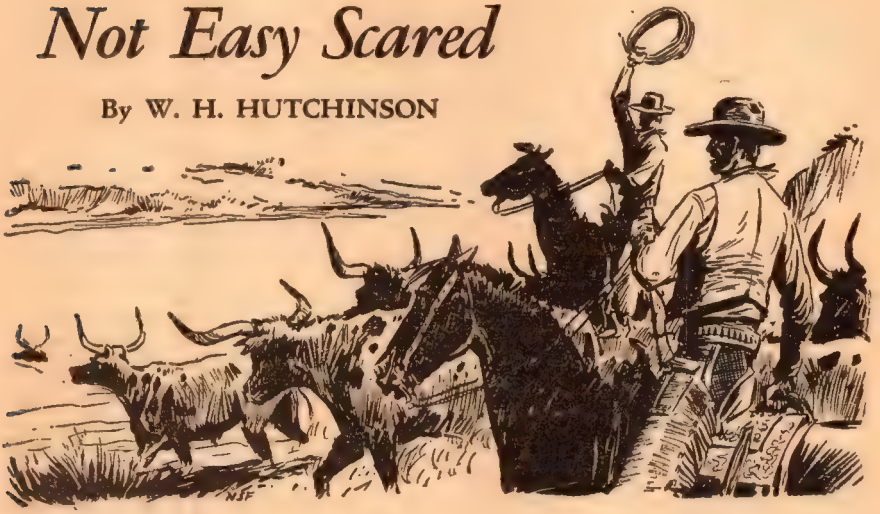
_____ Mrs. William Olds

_____ Sacajawea (Bird Woman)

Trail-driving Texas beef to Alder Gulch's hungry miners, Nelson Story figured to meet his troubles as they came. A ZGWM fact feature.

Not Easy Scared

By W. H. HUTCHINSON



NELSON STORY'S plan seems to have taken life the winter before he cleaned out a pocket of raw, red, placer gold at the head of Alder Gulch.

The teeming thousands of gold seekers who infested the western end of Montana Territory wintered tough in 1864. They were too busy seeking quick fortune to worry about the winter, and it came early and violently. Snow clogged the passes, Targhee, Bannock, Lost Trail, Lolo, and Lookout, that breached the Beaverheads and the Bitterroots for the supply lines to Oregon and Salt Lake City. Flour went to $140 a sack and the cheapest thing in Virginia City was a bath at $1.50 and no soap furnished. But over in Deer Lodge Basin Conrad Kohrs had turned a pretty penny buying worn-out cattle from summer emigrants along the Central Overland and fattening them on the rich blue-stem grass; his early-winter sale prices had been $100 for a steer, $75 for a cow, and the animals had cost him next to nothing.

So when Nels Story made his strike in the fall of '65, he remembered this feat of Kohrs, the canny Dutchman. He remembered, too, that men had swarmed into Montana in '65 wearing tattered clothes of butternut-gray, speaking softly about cheap cattle down in Texas. Nels Story remembered, too, the ten hard years he had spent since he first hit Fort Leavenworth in 1856, a gangling, rawboned boy from Ohio, with nothing in his favor but a capacity for work. Now he had a stake, and he would make it work for him. He would drive those cheap Texas cattle to Virginia City under their own power across free grass.

It had never been done before, but that made no difference to Nels Story. He didn't scare easy, then or later. He just sewed $10,000 in currency into

his clothes; he was a big man, so it didn't pad him out. He put enough more long green into his wallet for incidental expenses and rode out of Virginia City in the first month of 1866 to take his place among the men who braved the unknown and did first what many did after the trail was blazed. He set out cheerfully to gamble his fortune and his life, but it never occurred to him to worry much about troubles. He aimed to meet them as they came, and they came on the long trail north from Texas.

The spring grass was fetlock-deep when Nels Story uncramped himself in the sleepy hamlet of Fort Worth. When word got around that a damn fool from Montana was paying cash for cattle, the town woke up. Story shed currency out of his clothes like a post oak shedding leaves in a high wind. In less time than seems possible, he bought a thousand head of cattle with shoulders that would split a hailstone, and hired a trail crew to match. Texas was not only full of cattle, it was full of men who would try anything once—even driving to Montana—just to get out of it. When he was ready, Story pointed his lead steer's horns at the North Star and threw the herd on the Shawnee Trail.

As the old records show, 1866 was a wet year for Texas. Crossing the Red, the Canadian, and the Arkansas Rivers was no job for a man who liked his water in a glass. Between the rivers were white men with an eye for cattle they hadn't raised, and in the Nation the treaty chiefs thought Story ought to pay a toll for crossing their lands. Over and above these annoyances, the cattle themselves, long of horn and free of spirit, would string out for the day's drive, and then run all night—STOMPEDE!

Story learned trail driving as he went along, and came in time to the Kansas border at Baxter Springs without losing a man and but damned few cattle. But at Baxter Springs, he learned the full truth of the Texas saying, "The devil is a jayhawker."

The bearded, bigoted grangers who settled and held Kansas as a Free Soil state had no love for Texicans. The Texicans in turn wasted no love or language on "blue-bellied abolitionists" who used horses for plowing, not for riding. Over and beyond these personal differences, the Kansans maintained with feeling that the cat-hammed longhorns carried ticks that spread the dread "Texas fever" to rage like wildfire in dry wheat among their own precious milk cows and more precious oxen. They had an embargo—a Sharps quarantine—on Texas cattle entering Kansas, and they made it stick. Story could fight or turn back, it was all the same to them. But Story did neither.

Nels Story was willing and able to gamble his fortune, and his life, but not against a cold deck. Turning back was out of the question; fighting clear across Kansas was a waste of time. Up in Virginia City and Helena and all the gulches of western Montana, some thirty thousand miners were too busy to raise beef. That was his market, and that's where he was going, jayhawkers or no jayhawkers. He swung the trail herd west from Baxter Springs until he cleared the last settlements in Kansas. Then he turned north and east for Fort Leavenworth on the wild Missouri to draw another card in his high-stake game.

At Leavenworth, where he knew and was known from his freighting days, Story bought wagons and oxen

to pull them. He hired experienced bullwhackers, men who could goad an ox with "blue light" language and never touch the whip. Then he loaded his wagons with staple provisions—more profits if he got them to Montana—and then he made his final purchase: twenty-seven brand-new Remington breechloaders, Many-Shoot-Guns, one for each man in his crew. And then Nelson Story led his outfit, cattle, wagons and all, out along the deep ruts of the Oregon Trail where the land lifted imperceptibly with each passing dusty mile in promise of the Rockies still ahead.

While Story trailed up the Platte, the threads of his greatest trouble were being knotted together in the Powder River country, the land that offered the quickest, shortest route to the Montana gold fields, but not the safest. The Great White Father had guaranteed this land to the Sioux and Cheyennes by solemn treaty not a year gone, but now gold was worth more to the Nation than its treaties. The Indian Bureau sent E. B. Taylor to Fort Laramie to negotiate with the tribes for a wagon road through their buffalo range. The chiefs came in, Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, Man-Afraid-of-Horses, and the rest, but they refused to touch the pen until they knew what they were signing. Mr. Taylor gave them lavish presents and engaged in eloquent circumlocution. The chiefs took his presents and gave him overpowering, and better, rhetoric in return.

The debate was still in progress on June 16, 1866, when Colonel Henry B. Carrington marched a thousand men into Fort Laramie on his way, under orders, to build forts to guard the new road to the gold fields. The debate broke up forthwith. The chiefs were understandably confused. Red Cloud exploded in language that lost something in translation about the White Father who sent one man to buy a road and another man to steal it at the same time. The chiefs took their people away from Fort Laramie after advising Colonel Carrington that forts, or a road, meant war.

Carrington was not a field soldier; he was an engineer and a garrison-duty officer. Like many garrison men, he set great store on spit and polish, but he was, also, a man of honesty and a realist. He knew that his troops were mostly raw recruits, with too many band musicians among them for a good fighting force. Also, many of his officers had their wives along, pursuant to orders, as the War Department could see little danger in Indians after whipping Confederates. Carrington took counsel with his civilian guide and scout, Jim Bridger, Old Gabe himself, whom the Sioux now called Big Throat from his pendant goiter.

From a lifetime of experience, some bitter, Old Gabe told the colonel that there were easier ways to make a living than by fighting Sioux. Carrington tried to get his orders changed, to permit a delay until the peace conference could be resumed and, maybe, settled amicably. Back in St. Louis, the Department Commander told Carrington to march immediately; after all, St. Louis was a long way from Powder River. So the colonel marched his men out of Fort Laramie and up the trail where Powder River spread its headwater arms along the eastern slope of the Big Horns. The Sioux began to make his life miserable, and to prove time after time that a warrior with a horn-backed bow and a quiver full of broad-head arrows was more than a

match for a soldier with a single-shot Springfield.

By the time Nelson Story trailed into Laramie, Carrington had garrisoned Fort Reno and moved on north, fighting guerrilla actions all the way, to build Fort Phil Kearney where the trail crossed Big Piney Creek. The army at Fort Laramie told Story he'd never make it to Montana by the Bozeman Trail—too many Sioux; they suggested strongly that he had better take the old route, across South Pass to Fort Hall in Idaho and thence north and east to Virginia City.

Story listened, smelled the hint of winter in the morning air, and shook his head. He had lost time, precious time, from that Kansas detour. He knew his race was against winter now, as well as the Sioux, and he knew that winter came early, too early for a trail herd, in the passes of the Beaverhead Range. It was the Bozeman Trail or nothing, with or without Sioux. He put the little pot in the big one, as the saying goes, and headed north for Powder River.

A whooping, swirling knot of Sioux poured over a ridge just south of Fort Reno, knocked down his two point riders and went yonderly with as many cattle as they could manage on a dead run. Story kept the herd moving, put his wounded men in the wagon, and by the time soldiers from the fort got on the scene, he had gone after his cattle with half his riders and their breechloaders. What's more, he got his cattle back. As one of his riders explained it in later years, "We s'prized them Indians an' they wasn't in no shape to protest much." But at Fort Phil Kearney, Story found a tougher adversary, Colonel Carrington.

The colonel had built one of the finest forts in the west, but he had lost a hundred and fifty men doing it. His wood cutters had been ambushed and his supply trains cut up. The colonel was Sioux-happy; the Sioux were *coup*-crazy. Carrington forbade Story to proceed further until permission could be obtained from headquarters in St. Louis. If Story wanted to commit suicide, it had to be done through channels!

Story pitched like a bay steer but there was no help for it. He threw his herd on the bed grounds assigned him, three miles from the fort to save the nearer grass for the army mounts, or what was left of them. And three miles from the fort was as good as a thousand so far as any army protection was concerned.

Story corralled his wagons and fought his own battle with the Sioux within sight of the fort's three hundred soldiers, while he waited. But waiting meant time, and time meant winter, and winter meant losing his great gamble. Nelson Story treated Colonel Carrington like a jayhawker.

He called his men together and told them that he planned to make Virginia City before too much snow flew, come Hell or High Water, Sioux or Carrington, and how did they feel about it? The men said "Yes"—all but one. Story got to his own hip first and the recalcitrant changed his vote. When darkness fell on October 22, 1866, Story took his outfit wide around the fort and into the forbidden land. Colonel Carrington did not see fit to follow him and bring him back.

North of Phil Kearney, Story adopted a new policy. He trailed at night, and grazed the herd by day. The Sioux made two raids and then learned that twenty-seven men with breechloaders

were more terrible than three hundred soldiers with Springfields. They hung on the periphery of the herd, like yellow jackets buzzing above a butcher's block, but the only *coup* they counted on Story's outfit was one venturesome rider who went hunting alone in broad daylight and got nailed to the grass with arrows for his pains.

The outfit forged on, slow but sure, while the cattle got fat on the sun-cured blue-joint in the bottoms. Across Clark's Fort they went, where mush ice rimmed the banks, into the valley of the Yellowstone, up and over Bozeman Pass, across the Gallatin and the low range beyond to the Madison, where they turned south over well-known country.

On December 9, 1866, Nelson Story led his outfit down the main street of Virginia City, Montana Territory, at the end of the trail. He had gambled and won, and just in time.

Behind him, winter closed the Bozeman Trail, and the Sioux kept it closed for four long years. Behind him, Colonel Fetterman rode out of Fort Phil Kearney, leading himself and seventy-eight men to certain death beneath the hunting arrows of Red Cloud's braves. And behind him, when the Sioux were pacified, the Texas cattle by hundreds of thousands followed the way Nelson Story blazed to stock the ranges of the north.

Twenty years after his memorable feat, when the Big Die of 1886 cost Nelson Story, cowman, a big two-thirds of his stock, he started fresh again without a whimper. He never did scare easy.

Answers to "The 'Weaker' Sex in the Old West" Quiz on page 118

1. Cynthia Ann Parker.
2. Martha Jane Cannary.
3. Tamsen Donner.
4. Belle Starr.
5. Sacajawea (Bird Woman).
6. Eleanore Dumont.
7. Mrs. William Olds.
8. Olive Oatman.
9. Josefa Jaramillo.
10. Lola Montez.

A Novelette by Frank Gruber

RIDE NO MORE

Jim Sutton, hard-bitten veteran of the Kansas-Missouri guerrilla warfare, rides for the hills and a rest from violence—and straight into the most savage, ruthless fight of his strife-torn career.

Chapter One

Tough Customer

THE road led to the west. It consisted of two winding ribbons, cut through the short buffalo grass. The driver of the first wagon team that had come this way had let his horses pick their way and those that came after had followed the trail, until now there was a well defined road, that turned out for a boulder or tree stump here and for a sloping knoll, there.

The black gelding plodded between the two ruts. It walked with a peculiar, tired gait that seemed to have been transmitted to the man in the saddle. He rode completely relaxed and slumped forward, so that his chin almost rested on his chest.

Only now and then did he raise his head a little to look ahead. Then his eyes became less slitted. But they were tired eyes. His face was lean and burned by a thousand suns. He looked thirty-five or six. Actually, he was twenty-seven.

It was a wiltingly hot day, but he wore a coat—an alkali-stained, patched coat that was frayed at the cuffs. A flannel shirt, worn, faded levis, and dusty, cracked boots, run down at the heels, completed his dress. Except for a flat-crowned black Stetson and a revolver that hung low on his right side, protruding beneath the coat.

Three miles back he had skirted the tiny hamlet of Wagon Wheel, as he had circled a score of other towns and villages these last two weeks. His destination was the haze of mountains ahead. There, in the Badlands, they had said, he would find sanctuary. Rest.

And he needed rest. He was tired. The trail had been a long one—eleven years. Only eleven years? It seemed

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like a lifetime.

Eleven years. 1863. When two mighty armies had grappled in mortal combat, when men's passions ran wild and hatreds dominated all. Life had been cheap then and blood plentiful.

It soaked the fields and meadows, trickled in gullies and ravines and ran in streams at Lawrence and Baxter Springs. At Lexington and Centralia and ghastly Westport.

Missouri and Kansas, where the Civil War had begun five years before Sumter fell, where neighbor fought neighbor, where families split and some donned the blue and some the gray. And some skulked through the brush and rode screaming the terrifying guerrilla yell, with Quantrell and Todd and Bloody Bill Anderson.

The madness had abated at last and the blue and the gray laid down their arms and once more harnessed their horses to the plow. They didn't forget, but they were too thankful that it was over to talk much about it.

The blue and the gray were at peace —comparative peace. But the others— those who had been with Quantrell at Lawrence, with Anderson at Bloody Centralia—they didn't win peace. They hadn't earned it. Some sought for it in exile, a few found it in death.

Jim Sutton hadn't found it in eleven years. He would have welcomed it with Maximilian in Mexico, with the French at Sedan when the Prussian artillery pounded the Grand Army to pieces. He hadn't found it in Missouri, riding with those whose names were whispered in dread.

He was seeking it now. In hills ahead, where they said there were others of his kind. One more valley, one more range to cross and he could lie down beside a cool stream and look up at the blue sky overhead, at the stars at night. And rest.

Just one more range and he would have to ride no more.

The gelding lifted its head, whickered and was ready for any contingency. Gallop and charge, trot and wheel. If necessary.

One moment Sutton had seen only a clump of cottonwoods. Now two horsemen had materialized, sitting quietly in their saddles, rifles across pommels, pointed carelessly in his direction.

He pressed his knee into the gelding's side and it came to a stop, thirty feet from the other horsemen. His halt encouraged the others to move their mounts forward into the rutted trail.

They were hard-looking men, one tall and heavy-set and a single revolver at his side; the other slight and hatchet-faced, ugly and long-nosed. Besides the rifle he had a gun at each thigh.

It was the big man who spoke. He said, "Going far this way?"

Only to the hills ahead. But Sutton couldn't tell that. Men headed for the Badlands never told their destination.

He said, "Not so far."

The answer wasn't enough for the big man. "To the hills?" he prodded.

Sutton shrugged.

The little man spoke up. "Tough customer, hey?"

Sutton said, "Yes." It was a flat statement, without the slightest tinge of braggadocio.

The little man seemed about to challenge Sutton's assertion, but his companion shook his head slightly. He nodded at Sutton. "Your name in the book? Is that why you're headed for the hills?"

Sutton gathered up the reins with his left hand. He knew when a fight

could be avoided, just as well as when it had to be made.

He said, "I'm coming through—"

That was fight.

Their rifles were on him, they were two to one and he had only the one revolver. He had to carry the fight to them—smash them or be smashed. He went for his gun, continued the downward movement, so all of his body but one leg was protected by the gelding. He fired under the animal's neck. It was Indian fighting. The guerrillas had adopted it years ago, for close work.

It should have been successful. That it wasn't, was due entirely to the fact that the bigger man instead of trying a snapshot with his rifle, reared his horse up on its hind legs. Sutton's first bullet smashed into the animal's breast, so that it screamed in anguish and plunged over backward, unseating the big man.

Sutton hadn't known, of course, that the little man was the deadlier of the two. Because a man wore two guns didn't necessarily mean that he lived up to them. This one did. And it cost Sutton the fight.

Before he could whip his revolver to the right, a bullet seared through the calf of Sutton's exposed leg and plowed deep into the black gelding's side. The faithful animal broke in its plunge, stumbled, and barely kept from falling. The stumble, more than the bullet, dislodged Sutton. He landed heavily on one foot, fell to his knee, but still gripping tight the bridle reins let the black pull him up again.

He ran two or three steps beside the gelding, then caught the pommel of his McClellan saddle and vaulted up. It was precision work. He touched the saddle and swiveled back, all in the same movement.

The second rifle bullet caught him in the side. A white, fierce light exploded in his brain and he heard himself saying in surprise, "I'm through!"

Chapter Two

Valley Trouble

THIS thing that was happening to her father was so new, so unlike him that Helen Fraser could not understand it. She'd thought she'd known him. She'd been with him every day for the last nine years, ever since that day he had come riding to her grandmother's, wearing the faded, patched, gray uniform. He'd been almost a stranger. She was eleven and hadn't seen him in four years.

He was not a cheerful man. He had been with Joe Johnston at Bull Run, had followed him through for years, through Atlanta, to North Carolina, where he had, with Johnston, tendered his sword to the gaunt, fierce-eyed Sherman.

The Yanks, the carpetbag politicians, ruled East Texas in 1865. Their attitude toward former officers of the Confederate Army was not conducive to a quiet, peaceful life and Major Fraser had taken his eleven-year-old daughter and headed westward, beyond the Pecos River, where there were no settlements and no one to ask a man's political views.

There *were* men west of the Pecos, but they were furtive creatures who lived in the hills and sought anonymity. They asked no questions and wanted none asked of them. They came from all over the country; some had been here for years. In the places

where they had originated, officials had written after their names G.T.T.—Gone to Texas. That was their obituary as well.

They had not bothered Major Fraser when he had first come to the valley. Not ranchers or farmers themselves, they made no protest when he built a home and had brought a herd of cattle to the valley. Perhaps they regretted not having discouraged him, in the years that followed, but by that time Major Fraser was too firmly rooted in the valley and there were others like him—men whose cattle numbered in the thousands and roamed the broad valley at will.

After the ranchers came the farmers and small stockmen. They stopped their wagons one day and the next a shack or hut sprang, seemingly, out of the ground. They brought two or three horses with them, a cow or two, and broke the buffalo-grass-sodded ground with their plows.

The big ranchers resented the invasion of the settlers. They made life miserable for them and gave them no rest. In the natural course of events they would have driven the little men westward, or back toward the rising sun, from where they came. Except for one thing—spools of barbed wire—that was brought out in 1873. It was the most devastating thing the ranchers had ever seen. The land did not belong to them, of course, except by right of conquest.

It was government land and every man had an equal right to it. The ranchers did not quarrel over the land, there was so much of it. If a settler here and there squatted down on a quarter section, it was of no matter. The roaming herds of half-wild cattle trampled down anything the settler planted. They broke down pole fences. But—they did not break through the barbed wires that the little men strung around their farms. They did not break through the barbed wire, although they were sometimes thirsty and the wire enclosed a spring or water hole.

In dry years cattle skeletons began to dot the range. 1874 was a hot, dry year.

Major Fraser was the first rancher in Wagon Wheel Valley. That did not automatically make him the leader of the ranchers. He won that honor because he was the man most capable of accomplishing things. The other ranchers conceded that.

Helen Fraser had seen the nesters come and had secretly welcomed them. There were women with them, girls her own age. Susan Quadland's father was a nester, yet Sue became Helen's best friend. She lived only two miles from the Fraser ranch house and seldom a day passed that she did not ride over to visit Helen, or the latter go to see Susan.

Helen's father had not commented on the friendship—not until recently. And then, one day, he had announced that he did not want Helen to see Susan Quadland again. This morning, Helen had disobeyed her father. And when she had returned from the Quadland farm, her father had been waiting for her on the veranda of the adobe ranch house. He said:

"I told you not to see Susan Quadland again. I do not want to remind you of that again."

In hurt astonishment, Helen Fraser had questioned, "But why, Father? Susan's my best friend. She's a fine girl, and—"

"And her father's organizing the nesters to fight me," Major Fraser snap-

ped. He walked deliberately away from Helen, heading toward the corral behind the bunkhouse.

Helen watched him out of sight, stunned. Her chin trembled and she had to fight back threatening tears. It was the first time he had used such a tone toward her.

She was still standing there, staring toward the bunkhouse when Ambrose came out of the house behind Helen. Ambrose had been a slave. Emancipation had freed him legally, but it had not changed his status with the Fraser family, except that he asked for a dollar on the rare occasions he went to the village of Wagon Wheel. He was cook, housekeeper, and valet.

He spoke softly to Helen. "Don't you bother, Miss Helen. The majah got hisself a powerful lot of worry with them nesters. They fencin' in all the water."

Helen shook her head in bewilderment. "But there's room for everyone in the valley. The little ground the farmers are using doesn't mount to anything. They're all so poor—"

"They's white trash, Miss Helen," Ambrose said. "The majah's right when he say you shouldn't ought to have no truck with them. Why don't you go take yourself a ride and get some of that fine sun? You'll feel better and when you come back I'll have lunch ready."

Helen did not particularly want to take a ride, but when Ambrose brought her saddled filly around in a few minutes, she mounted it and started in the general direction of Wagon Wheel, some six miles from the ranch.

A mile from the ranch she saw the black gelding. It was standing beside the rutted road, bridle reins trailing. When Helen approached the horse shied away, but stopped a few paces beyond.

Then Helen saw the body on the ground, half concealed by a small clump of bushes. In a flash she was down on the ground, running forward. She had to part the bushes to see the upper half of the man's body and when she looked down and saw the blood-soaked clothes, she gasped aloud.

She was afraid to try to pull him out of the bushes, so spent several moments bending down and breaking off branches, but finally she got in close and dropped to her knees.

He was lying on his back, his eyes closed, but he was alive, although breathing only faintly. She did not think the wound in his leg was serious and paid no attention to it, but the blood-soaked shirt and coat caused her to shudder. She had seen wounds before; cowboys were always getting hurt and the major generally acted as doctor, physician, and surgeon. On several occasions Helen had been compelled to help him.

The wounded man weighed a hundred and seventy to one hundred and eighty pounds. Helen knew that she could never lift him on to the saddle of her horse.

She drew back the tail of his coat, loosened his shirt and with her small, strong hands ripped it upward, exposing the wound. It was still bleeding slightly and when Helen saw the wound, she knew that the man was critically hurt. If the bleeding continued—

She turned away and, lifting her riding-skirt slightly, pulled down on her petticoat and tore into the hem, five or six inches. Then, calmly, she began tearing the wide strip about the skirt. She fell again to her knees and putting both hands under the wounded

man turned him on his other side, so she could get the bandage under him.

She managed it, then put him back into his original position. As careful as she was, she must have hurt him, for he twitched and a moan escaped his lips.

Her eyes darted to his face and she inhaled softly. His eyes were open and he was looking at her.

Scarlet flooded Helen's face and she bit her lip. Then she took hold of the bandage again. "You're badly hurt," she said, "I can't move you alone. I'm just going to fix this bandage, then I'll go for help. It won't take long."

She tore off a piece of the bandage, wadded it, and placed it over the wound. Then she brought the two ends of the skirt hem together and tied them tightly, so the pad pressed down on the wound.

Finished, she got to her feet. "I won't be gone twenty minutes Lie still until then."

His lips moved suddenly and words came from them. Helen was shocked by the hopeless tone of his voice. He said:

"Don't bother. It's not worth while."

"But it is!" Helen exclaimed. "You—you're hurt too badly to ride by yourself. You've—been shot!"

His eyes blinked assent and his lips moved, but no words came this time. Evidently he was too weak to speak more.

Helen cried, "I'll hurry!" She stepped out of the bushes and ran toward the filly, vaulted into the saddle, and sent the filly galloping back toward the ranch.

In front of the ranch house she sprang from the saddle and ran toward the door, crying, "Ambrose! Get one of the men to hitch a team to the wagon. Put some blankets in it—and hurry!"

Ambrose popped out of the house, his eyes rolling. "What's up, Miss Helen? Your father—"

"No—no! It's a stranger. He's up the road, badly hurt. We've got to bring him here, Ambrose. Hurry."

From the doorway a cool voice said, "Easy, Amby."

Helen Fraser flashed a look at her father's foreman. Ned McTammany was thirty, a tall, broad-shouldered man, burned to the complexion of an Apache. McTammany's lips were curled perpetually into an insolent sneer. He could get twice the work out of the hands that Major Fraser did.

He went on, "Who's this that's hurt, Helen?"

Helen exclaimed impatiently, "Get the wagon, Ambrose! And don't forget the blankets." Then, when the black man had trotted off, she turned to the foreman.

"A stranger. I found him up the road. He'd been—shot!"

"A stranger—shot?" McTammany sniffed. "One of the wild bunch from the hills. Let him lay where he is."

"What?" cried Helen. "Why—why, he's seriously hurt. He'll—die!"

"What if he does? They're always fighting among themselves up there. They're a bunch of murderers and fugitives. We don't want to have anything to do with them. Let them kill each other off."

Anger drove the color from Helen Fraser's face. "Ned McTammany," she said furiously, "that's the most cold-blooded thing I've ever heard. What if this man is an—one of them. He's been badly wounded; he's dying."

"Yore dad would let him die," McTammany said sullenly. "He's told me

over and over not to mix with the bunch in the hills."

"Here comes Ambrose with the wagon," Helen said coldly. "You can stay here if you want, but—Ambrose, up the road."

McTammany suddenly sprang from the veranda and bounded into the body of the wagon. He reached forward and jerked the lines from the Negro.

"I'll drive!" he said curtly. He snatched the whip from Ambrose's hand and cracked it over the rumps of the team.

The wagon leaped away. Helen ran back to her filly, swung into the saddle, and then pounded after the wagon. She overtook it before it was a quarter of a mile from the ranch house, then galloped ahead.

The black gelding was still beside the road, but the wounded man had moved. He had crawled out from the bushes and was lying face downward in the grass. He was unconscious again and Helen saw that the bandage about his middle was stained with fresh blood. He had tried, in her absence, to gain his horse and had not been able to make it.

She cried out in dismay and thrust her hand under his body to feel his heart. She felt it only faintly. By that time the wagon tore up and Ambrose and McTammany leaped to the ground.

The foreman snorted. "He's one of them all right; he looks like a hard customer. But it ain't worth picking him up. He's a goner."

"He isn't!" cried Helen. "And if you don't want to help—" She stooped and was about to grasp the wounded man by the shoulders, when McTammany shoved her roughly aside.

"Amby!" he snapped.

The old servant's eyes rolled and he grasped Jim Sutton's booted legs. He and McTammany carried the wounded man to the wagon and deposited him on the blankets that Ambrose had spread out.

Helen climbed into the wagon herself and kneeled down beside the blankets. She instructed Ambrose to follow the wagon with her horse. By that time McTammany had climbed back into the wagon and was turning the horses around, to go back toward the ranch house.

He drove reasonably carefully, but did not avoid a couple of holes and the wagon bounced heavily each time. The wounded man groaned once.

Chapter Three

"The Name Is Jim Sutton."

JIM SUTTON opened his eyes and looked at the clean, whitewashed ceiling above him. Then he dropped his eyes and saw the white walls around him and finally, the blankets and sheets that covered him.

He hadn't slept in a bed in months, in a room such as this in years.

He stirred and dull pain touched his left side, the calf of his left leg. He lay still, reviewing the events that preceded his lapse into unconsciousness.

He'd encountered two hard-looking men on the trail who had disputed his right to pass. He'd shot it out with them—and they had beaten him!

Or had they? He remembered now that he had fled down the trail, that he had fallen from his horse and lain for some time in only semi-consciousness, until he had opened his eyes and looked into the scared, white face of—an

angel.

This—was her home. No doubt of that. He'd warned her to leave him alone, but she hadn't heeded the warning. She'd got help and had him brought here. And—from the feel of them—his wounds had been treated and bandaged.

A step sounded just outside the door of the bedroom and then the door opened. A lean, middle-aged man looked in, saw that Sutton's eyes were open, and came into the room. He closed the door carefully behind him.

"You've come round," he commented.

Sutton blinked in assent and kept his eyes on the other's face. It was his play. He hadn't asked to be brought here.

The man said, "I'm Harvey Fraser. My daughter had you brought here—yesterday."

That surprised Sutton. He wouldn't have believed that he would ever remain unconscious for twenty-four hours. He didn't realize that the years had left their mark on him.

Fraser looked thoughtfully at Sutton for a moment. Then he nodded slowly. "Your name's in the book?"

The book. Those men yesterday had asked practically the same question. Sutton said, "What book?"

"The Crime Book," Fraser replied. "The adjutant general got it out six months ago. It's got—eight thousand names in it."

"My name," Sutton said evenly, "is Sutton—Jim Sutton."

Fraser screwed up his mouth, then finally shook his head. "I don't have the book."

Sutton said, "The name is *Jim* Sutton."

For just an instant more Fraser's eyes were blank, then recognition shot into them and he gasped, "Jim Sutton—of Missouri!"

"If you'll get me my clothes, I'll be going," Sutton said.

Fraser's forehead wrinkled. He said in a perplexed tone, "I was at Wilson's Creek, with Ben Culloch. And at Pea Ridge. I—you were a Confederate."

Sutton gave him the answer blunt. "I was at Lawrence, Kansas, with Quantrell. At Centralia with Bill Anderson."

"And with Shelby in Mexico?" Fraser asked softly.

"But that was in 'sixty-five. I was never in the Confederate Army, during the war. Not in the regular service."

Fraser's eyes were still staring down at Sutton. "I never thought—" He laughed shortly, "Well, I *did* think. Even down here, the newspapers—"

Sutton didn't answer for a moment. Then he said, "You know that I rode with—Jesse?"

Fraser nodded. He chewed at his lip. "Is he—here?"

"No," Sutton said quickly. "I haven't seen him for years. I—I was heading for the hills."

A startled look came to Fraser's eyes. "I've almost forgotten. They were here last night. They're coming again today. They—they're Rangers! They haven't admitted it, but I know."

"You mean," said Sutton, "two men—one kind of hatchet-faced?"

"Yes. That's the one calls himself Johnny Buff. But the other, Welker, is the leader. A hard man."

Welker might be the leader, Sutton thought, but the little fellow, Buff, was the dangerous one. Rangers? Sutton didn't think so. Unless they had a strange breed of law officer in Texas.

He said, "My clothes—"

Fraser nodded and started for the door, then turned. "Look here," he exclaimed. "You're from Missouri—fresh! I don't think your name will be in the book. Tell them it's Smith and they won't know the difference."

"You forget," said Sutton, "I had a fight with them."

"You only killed Welker's horse," Fraser snorted. "How were you to know they weren't from the hills? They didn't say they were Rangers, did they?"

"I don't know that they are Rangers."

"Oh, they are, all right. The boys in the hills never come down here. They're McNelly's boys. The only reason they're not in the hills themselves is that they've got jobs and they're wearing badges. They are killers—every last one of them. And McNelly's the worst of them all. He hasn't arrested six men in the last six months, but they say a thousand men have disappeared in that time. Well, maybe they deserved it, but making the Rangers paid murderers doesn't help matters any. You stay here. I'll put you to work."

Jim Sutton blinked in astonishment. "You—you'd give *me* a job?"

"Why not? You were a Confederate soldier—yes, you were. What else you did—well, perhaps you had to do it. Why do you suppose I'm out here in West Texas, in this Godforsaken land? Do you think I came because I liked the country? The carpetbaggers, the Yanks, and their damn Freedmen's Bureau, that's why I'm here. And there's few enough here I can trust. I'm in the middle of—" Fraser winced and caught himself. "I mean, I can use a man like you. I don't trust my foreman, Ned McTammany, any farther than I could throw a longhorn bull. I need—"

Fraser stopped again. The door had opened suddenly under his hand and Helen Fraser's blond head poked into the room. Her eyes lit up when she saw Sutton.

"You're awake!" she exclaimed. "Good. Father, you shouldn't—"

"We've been talking," Fraser said very gruffly. "Mr. Sutton's much better. Uh—Helen, this is James Sutton. My daughter, Helen."

Sutton said, "I guess I owe you thanks for—"

Helen Fraser cut him off. "What else could I do? You were wounded—hurt. Dad says the wounds aren't serious."

"No. The one in your leg is just a scratch. The other one was clean. You'll be up and around in a week."

A week? Sutton intended to be out of here by evening. The hills weren't so far from here and he could rest and take things easy when he got there.

Harvey Fraser had been a Confederate officer and his sympathies were naturally with anyone who had been on his side, in even such a capacity as Missouri's guerrillas, but Fraser was passing too lightly over the fact that the war ended in 1865—and some guerrillas had not stopped then. Jim Sutton's name was linked too closely with one that was even now ringing throughout the country, a man who had once been a guerrilla himself.

Sutton would go—quietly. He let his eyes flutter and half-close, as if in fatigue.

Instantly the girl exclaimed, "We'd better let him rest, Father!"

They left the room then, and Sutton's eyes opened once more. For a while they stared at the closed door, stared as if they could see through the

thick wood into the next room.

Finally, Sutton's eyes shifted to another door at the side of the room. A closet. His clothing was probably in there.

He threw back the blankets and swung his feet outward, to put them on the floor. He did not immediately complete the movement, for a spasm of pain exploded in his side and filtered to every part of his body, almost blinding him.

After a moment he was able to go on, but the walk across the piece of floor was a difficult one. When he made the closet he pulled open the door and leaned against it awhile.

His shabby clothing hung in the closet. They had even put his ancient Navy Colt in with the rest. He put on his clothes a piece at a time, finally buckling about his waist the broad cartridge belt with its holster.

Finished dressing, he started for the door, but detoured to the bed and fell flat on it. For ten minutes he fought nausea.

He got up then and made another attempt for the door. Before he reached it he heard loud voices in the room outside.

One of the voices said, "His horse is in the corral. It's been shot. You've got him here and we want him."

It was Welker, the man Fraser had said was a Ranger.

Fraser retorted, "No man takes another out of my house without my permission."

Welker's voice said sneeringly, "A bloody king, eh? A cattle king who's master of all he surveys. That's out, Mister. So are you. I'm Sergeant Welker of the Texas Rangers. The State of Texas is talking when I say something. Step aside, Mister, or—"

Jim Sutton pulled open the door and stepped through. "Here I am, Welker," he said. Johnny Buff was there, too.

Harvey Fraser exclaimed, "Jim, you shouldn't have—"

His eyes on Welker, Sutton held up his hand to Major Fraser. He said to Welker, "What do you want with me?"

"I don't want anything with you—I want you."

"You've got a warrant?"

Welker took a nickeled badge from his shirt pocket. "That's my warrant. If your name's in the Crime Book—"

"It isn't."

"What *is* your name?"

Major Fraser replied quickly, "Jim Andrew. And you won't find it in the book."

Welker nodded to Johnny Buff. The latter shook his head. Welker scowled. "You pulled a gun on me, yesterday. You killed my horse."

Major Fraser exclaimed, "How the devil was he to know *you* weren't an outlaw? You certainly don't look like a law officer."

Welker showed his teeth. "Look, Fraser, I've been hearing things around here. You think you're Godalmighty yourself. Maybe you have been, since the war. No one's bothered to trim your horns. But that's all over. We're moving in here and I'm telling you right now that the things you've been getting away with won't go anymore. I represent the state of—"

"Of Texas," Major Fraser snapped. "You mean you represent a small political faction who happen to be running things in Austin. Out here you don't represent anything. I'm telling you, don't try anything around here. With me or anyone working for me."

Johnny Buff spoke up suddenly. "Andrew working for you?"

"He is."

Sergeant Welker said doggedly. "He killed my horse—"

"Sue him, then," Major Fraser said. "And now, good morning. We've got work to do around here."

Sergeant Welker stood his ground for a moment, but Johnny Buff shrugged and started moving toward the front door. Welker finally followed. When his partner had stepped outside, Welker turned in the doorway. "This ain't all, you two. You'll be hearing from us some more." Then he went out.

Major Fraser turned quickly to Sutton. "You shouldn't have got up, Sutton! You'll—"

Sutton waved him away. "I'm all right. I've got to be going. Those fellows aren't going to let this thing drop."

"What can they do?" Major Fraser snorted. "There's only two of them. The local sheriff knows which side his bread is buttered on. He isn't going to back up a couple of gun hawks who happen to be wearing badges given them by someone five hundred miles away."

"They're the law," said Sutton, "if they fail, there'll be others coming after them."

"Not here. Why, out there in the hills are hundreds of men who've been there for years and no one's bothered about them. There are thieves, highwaymen, murderers—deserters from both armies of ten years ago. There aren't enough Rangers in the state of Texas to drive those men out of the hills. And there aren't enough to come into this valley and run things. No, there's no danger from the Rangers. Not from *them*."

"From who then?" Sutton asked.

Major Fraser's face twisted. "From the people here in the valley. The nesters and the sodbusters. We let them come in and now they outnumber us. They're crowding us off the range with their fences. They're letting our cattle die of thirst by fencing in water holes."

Sutton looked speculatively at the other. Major Fraser scowled and exclaimed, "All right, I'll put it to you bluntly. There's been trouble and there'll be more of it. That's why—well, that's why I want you to work for me."

"You've put it bluntly," said Sutton, "so I'll give it back to you in the same way. You're not hiring me then, you're hiring my gun."

"That *is* putting it bluntly," Fraser said.

It had been a long trail and a weary one. And the end of it was not yet in sight.

He said wearily to Major Fraser, "All right, I'll stay here—awhile. If I can get a little rest—"

"Of course!" exclaimed the major, stepping forward solicitously. "You ought to be in bed now. Take things easy—"

"If you don't mind," said Sutton, "I'd feel just as well sitting outside—on the veranda."

The major stepped quickly to the door, opened it and turned to help Sutton. The latter shook his head slightly and walked out unaided. There was a wicker armchair on the veranda, protected by the roof. He sat down heavily in it and looked out over the peaceful ranch yard.

Major Fraser cleared his throat. "If you don't mind—I've got some things to look after."

Sutton nodded and watched him walk across the yard to the bunkhouses. Sutton lifted his eyes to the

hills ahead. They were only a few miles away. Well—this was better.

He had been sitting on the veranda for about ten minutes, when boots crunched the hard-packed earth and Ned McTammany came around the corner of the house.

The tall foreman's face twisted inscrutably when he saw Sutton. But he came forward and extended his hand. "I'm McTammany, the foreman. The major just told me that you're going to stay on awhile. That's fine. Hmm, your name's Andrew, isn't it?"

Sutton nodded. "Glad to know you, McTammany. I suppose I ought to move to the bunkhouse?"

The foreman shook his head. "Not yet. Boss says you're to stay here until you're feeling better. Uh, I was with the girl when she picked you up, yesterday. Tough. Those damn Rangers are going to have a spill—they go around here shooting up—uh, people."

Sutton said nothing. The foreman moistened his lips with his tongue.

"You're from up north, aren't you? Kansas?"

Sutton blinked. Kansas was one state where Missourians had never been welcome. "No," he said, "I'm not from Kansas."

McTammany looked down at his hands. "That's fine, Andrew. Uh—the boys don't think much of Kansans, you know. Not the ones who've gone up the trail with herds."

Sutton rested his head back against the chair and let his eyes close until they were slits. McTammany frowned, then finally took the hint. "See you around, Andrew," he said, and walked off.

Sutton opened his eyes when he heard McTammany's steps retreating. He had an uneasy feeling that he and the foreman were not going to hit it off.

For three days Jim Sutton occupied the comfortable chair on the veranda of the Fraser ranch house, from seven in the morning until seven in the evening, leaving it only for meals inside. He soaked up the heat until the soreness went out of his wounds.

The activity of the ranch went on around him, but he took no part in it. Helen Fraser sat with him for brief periods, but her mind was generally preoccupied. Something was worrying her, Sutton guessed. Reticent himself, he never tried to make conversation, but Helen would break off now and then in the middle of a sentence and glance off to the north, where a thin plume of occasional smoke told Sutton there was another house.

On the fourth day, Sutton waited until Helen Fraser had been gone from the house for an hour, after having headed in an easterly direction. Then he called for Ambrose and asked after his horse.

"He's out on grass, Mist' Andrew," the colored man informed him. "He ain't had only a scratch and he's fit as a colt. Y'all wasn't thinkin' of ridin' him yet, was you?"

"If you'll find my gear," Sutton said.

Ambrose's black face creased. "Majah won't like that, Mist' Andrew. He say you still purty sick."

"I'm all right," Sutton said curtly. "I'd like you to get my horse."

Ambrose started to protest, looked suddenly into Sutton's stern face, and clamped his jaws shut. He trotted out to the bunkhouse. About ten minutes later he brought Sutton's black gelding, saddled, up to the veranda.

Sutton climbed stiffly into the saddle

and turned his animal's head to the north. The gelding trotted off briskly and Jim Sutton winced as the jolting reached his wounds. He pulled the horse up to a walk.

Cresting a knoll a half mile from the Fraser ranch house, Sutton looked down into a shallow ravine that was studded with cottonwood trees and, in the center, by a thick growth of brush.

He had a quick glimpse of a bay horse being pulled into the thicket of brush as he started down the slope into the ravine. The muscles of his jaws stood out in knots. He let his bridle reins fall carelessly and dropped his hands to his sides.

When the gelding entered the cottonwoods, Sutton made a quick movement with his left leg, swinging it over the pommel and in the same motion dropping lightly to the ground. His right hand whipped out the Navy Colt from its holster and peering into the brush, he called:

"All right, come out!"

For a moment there was silence and Jim Sutton wondered if the answer to his challenge would be a bullet. It wasn't, however. The bushes parted and a scared face appeared. The face of a girl.

She stepped free of the bushes and Jim Sutton inhaled softly. She wore Levis and boots, a flannel shirt, but no hat, her hair hanging in two chestnut braids down her back. She was an amazingly pretty girl.

He made a quick movement and his Navy Colt slipped back into its holster. The girl watched the action, fascinated. Then she said in a tone of awe, "Who are you?"

"They call me Jim Andrew," Sutton replied. "And you—?"

"Oh, I'm Susan Quadland," the girl replied. "I live"—she jerked a thumb over her shoulder—"back there."

"But why were you hiding?" Sutton asked. "I came near—I mean—"

Susan Quadland cut him off. "I know. You're the gunman." She said it naively and Sutton winced a little. Helen Fraser had described him like that. No—that would mean that Helen was an intimate of this girl and if so, they wouldn't be compelled to meet secretly like this.

He said, "Are you waiting here for someone?"

She shook her head quickly, but her hazel eyes were wider than before. She was lying. Sutton nodded and started to turn to his horse, when he heard the clop-clop of another horse's hoofs and saw Helen Fraser, astride her filly, come galloping down into the cottonwoods.

She didn't see him until she was well into the cover, but then she pulled up her horse shortly and stared at him with hostile eyes.

"Hello, Miss Fraser," Sutton said, "I was just taking a little ride."

"Well," she said in a brittle tone, "you know now. I suppose you'll make your report to Father."

He looked at her in surprise. "Report? What for?"

Susan Quadland answered for Helen Fraser. "Just because our fathers don't happen to get along is no reason for us to be enemies, Mr. Andrew. We—there aren't any other girls around in ten miles."

Sutton's eyes drew together. The Wagon Wheel setup was not yet clear to him. "You mean you two are meeting here secretly, because your fathers are on the outs?"

"Father hasn't told you?" Helen Fraser asked, unbelieving. "Then how did

you happen to come here? Don't tell me it was on your own initiative."

She had him there. He couldn't say he had come this way because of idle curiosity. The trait was not in character for him.

He bobbed his head, almost curtly, and climbed into the saddle. Then he pointed the animal's head straight ahead, through the ravine.

When he reached the far crest he could see the Quadland ranch, a squat adobe house, a barn, and a pole corral. He cursed himself for a fool, that he could not go back immediately by way of the ravine. He knew that he was overdoing things. Already he was beginning to be a little giddy from the exertion of the ride. He was weaker from his wounds than he'd realized.

Quadland was a nester. He was therefore an enemy of Major Fraser. So now Sutton was riding down upon the Quadland place.

No, he wasn't, for there ahead of him was an unfamiliar sight, to Sutton. A barbed-wire fence. He hadn't even noticed the thin poles that held up the two fine strands of wire, the stuff was so new and unexpected to him.

Sutton rode up to it and leaning over in the saddle examined the sharp barbs. Yes, they would tear a steer's hide, all right. They would—

Zing!

A bullet whistled over his head and almost instantly the bang of a high-powered rifle hit Sutton's ears. Before the report had died out, Sutton's Navy Colt was in his fist, cocked.

But he held his fire. A tall, heavy-set man, carrying a Sharps rifle was striding toward him from the red adobe house. He yelled, when still some distance away.

"Don't you cut that wire!"

Sutton straightened in the saddle. "I wasn't going to cut it," he called back. "I was just looking at it."

"Looking, hell!" retorted Amos Quadland. He approached steadily. "I got a good notion to take you in to Wagon Wheel and turn you over to the sheriff. It's time we called a showdown on this wire-cutting business."

Quadland seemed oblivious of the Navy Colt in Sutton's hand, or else he had the sublime confidence of the Westerner that the rifle was a superior weapon to the Navy revolver.

Sutton said easily, "This is the first time I've seen barbed wire."

"Yah!" jeered Quadland. "You're one of Fraser's men, ain't you? Where's your wire cutter? Throw it down."

"I haven't got one," Sutton retorted, becoming nettled by the nester's insistence. "I've just gone to work for Fraser and since I'm a stranger around here, I haven't happened to see barbed wire before."

"Stranger, huh?" Quadland's eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't be that imported gun slinger, would you? The one who calls hisself Jim Andrew?"

Sutton's mouth became tight. "I don't get that 'imported' stuff, Mister."

"The hell you don't! Throw down that there pea shooter. I'm a-goin' to teach you a lesson."

Sutton groaned inwardly. Quadland was carrying this too far. He was just enough of an amateur with guns to believe that because the muzzle of his rifle was pointed at Sutton, that he had the drop on him.

Sutton said quickly, "I haven't got a wire cutter, Quadland, and I give you my word that I was only looking at the wire."

Quadland cut him off. "Never mind that. Throw down that revolver, or—"

He had built himself up to it. He was going to make an issue of it. So Sutton had to down him. But at that very instant hoofs pounded to the rear of Sutton. Quadland's daughter—returning.

Sutton cursed inwardly. He could not shoot Quadland, not with that girl to see. He tossed his Navy revolver to the ground, the first time in all his life that he had surrendered to anyone.

Quadland snarled. "So you're a gun fighter, eh? Just as I thought, a yellow-belly, when a man's gun is pointing at you!"

"Father!" Susan Quadland cried in a frightened voice.

"Go to the house, Susan," Quadland ordered coldly. "Saddle my horse and bring him here. I'm going to take this wire cutter to Wagon Wheel and turn him over to the sheriff."

"No, Father," Susan exclaimed. "You can't do that. This—this is Jim Andrew, from the Fraser ranch."

"I know that," retorted her father. "And that's why I'm going to have him arrested."

"Please, Father," Susan pleaded, "I'm sure he didn't intend to cut your wire. I—I just saw him coming over this way."

"I was trying to tell your father that this is the first barbed wire I've ever seen," Sutton interposed quietly.

Quadland's rifle lowered, but his mien became only slightly less truculent. "All right, Andrew," he said thickly. "Turn your horse and get the devil away from here. But I'm warning you, don't you come near any of my wire. Understand?"

Sutton gestured to his gun on the ground. Quadland shook his head. "I don't trust any man from Fraser's ranch. You can call for your gun at Sheriff Wagner's office, in Wagon Wheel. Git, now!"

Sutton looked at Susan Quadland and turned his horse away. He'd never thought that the time would come when he would let another man take his gun away. But he had—to keep from killing the man.

He rode back to the Fraser ranch and turned his horse over to Ambrose. Then he resumed his seat on the veranda.

Helen Fraser returned half an hour later, took her horse to the corral, and came to the house. She nodded coolly to Sutton and went inside. She did not reappear the rest of the day.

Major Fraser came in from the range late in the afternoon. He clumped to the house. "Sixteen steers with their hides torn by wire," he said savagely, "and eight shot. Tomorrow I'm going to call for a showdown."

Sutton was up early the next morning and after breakfast took his post on the veranda. Yet it wasn't until after noon that Major Fraser gave any sign of activity. Then he had his own and Helen's horses saddled and brought out to the house.

Sutton said, "Mind if I ride with you, Major?"

Fraser looked at him in surprise. "To Wagon Wheel? That's a pretty far ride—five miles."

"I know, but I took a little ride yesterday. I'm feeling fine and—uh, I want to get some things in town. Tobacco."

Fraser's face screwed up. "Sure you can make it all right?"

"Of course. If you'll get Ambrose to saddle my horse."

Ten minutes later, they started for Wagon Wheel. Sutton tried to ride behind the major and Helen, but the former dropped back to his side and Helen

then spurted fifty feet ahead of them. She maintained that position all the way to the little cow town.

There were perhaps seventy-five buildings in Wagon Wheel, all of them on the one little street. Six of the buildings were saloons.

Major Fraser headed for the hitch-rail in front of Hackberry's General Store. Tying his horse to the rail, he said to Sutton, "I won't be going back to the ranch for two-three hours. If you don't want to wait—"

"I'll wait," said Sutton.

"Good. Then suppose you meet me here in two hours."

Sutton nodded. Helen Fraser had already dismounted and gone into the store. Sutton waited by the horses and watched Major Fraser clump up the wooden sidewalk and turn into a one-story frame shack.

After a few moments, Sutton sauntered in the same direction. When he came opposite the shack, he glanced to the right and saw a board beside the door, on which was painted SHERIFF'S OFFICE.

Major Fraser's voice came angrily, from the interior. "I don't give a damn what you say, Wagner. My steers are being killed and I'm not going to stand for it, any more."

A gruff voice answered placatingly, "Now, Major, maybe the damage ain't all on your side. The farmers have been takin' a lot of punishment from havin' their wire cut and crops trampled. On'y yesterday Amos Quadland came in to complain about one of your men cuttin' his wire."

"That's a lie!" burst out Major Fraser. "I've given my men strict orders, time and again, to leave the wire alone. None of them would dare—"

"No?" said the sheriff. "But it happens that Quadland caught your man redhanded. Took away his gun—"

Jim Sutton stepped into the sheriff's office. "Sheriff Wagner?" he said. "I understand you have a gun belonging to me."

Sheriff Wagner was a burly, red-faced man crowding fifty. He blinked at Sutton. "Uh—what gun?"

"A Navy Colt," Sutton replied. "I imagine Amos Quadland turned it over to you."

Major Fraser gasped. "Sutton! What—what are you talking about?"

"When I was taking my ride yesterday, Quadland got the idea that I was going to cut his wire. He drew down on me and made me drop my gun."

Sheriff Wagner glanced triumphantly at Major Fraser. "See? What did I tell you?"

Major Fraser groaned. "For God's sake, Sutton, you didn't—?"

"No. I didn't. I almost rode into the wire and stooped to look at it. You know—that's the first time I ever saw barbed wire."

"Yah!" Sheriff Wagner jeered.

Major Fraser whirled on the sheriff. "You damn fool, he's telling the truth. He's new to this country. Just came here this week."

A strange look came into the sheriff's eyes. "Did you call him Sutton? The name wouldn't be Jim Sutton, would it?"

Sutton said, "It would. I came here from Missouri and they don't have barbed wire up there—yet!"

Sheriff Wagner said softly, "Jim Sutton of Missouri!"

"Do you mind giving me my gun?"

Sheriff Wagner pulled open the drawer of a desk and brought out Sutton's Navy Colt. He slid it across the scarred wood and said significantly to

Major Fraser, "You still want to make that complaint, Major?"

Major Fraser cast a bitter glance at Sutton and without a word, turned on his heel. Sutton slipped his Navy Colt into its holster.

Fraser was waiting for him outside. "Sutton," he said thickly, "how did Quadland come to take your gun away from you?"

"He threw down on me with a rifle."

"And you let him? *You?*"

Sutton's mouth tightened. "I would have had to kill him. And I didn't want to do that."

Major Fraser stared at Sutton. "And Quadland's the ringleader of the nesters. You didn't want to kill him! Oh, hell!"

Fraser snorted and turning, started across the dirt street. Sutton watched him until he entered a saloon. Then he went slowly back toward the general store. As he passed it he glanced in and saw Helen Fraser in animated conversation with Susan Quadland.

He quickened his step, went past the store, and entered a saloon beyond. He took no note of the two or three customers in the place, but stepped to the bar and ordered a glass of beer.

It was cool and refreshing and he drank it slowly. Finished, he set the empty glass on the bar and turned around to survey the room. Ned McTammany, the foreman of the Fraser ranch, who had been standing at the far end of the bar, came over.

"Hello, Andrew," he said casually. "Kind of long trip for you."

Sutton shrugged and nodded. McTammany's face twisted into a cruel grin. "But I guess you got some practice yesterday. Hear you were out riding—over toward Quadland's place." His eyes dropped and he looked pointedly at Sutton's Navy Colt.

Sutton said deliberately, "Look, McTammany, I don't like you either. You want to let it rest there, or—?"

Before McTammany could take up the challenge, the batwing doors of the saloon swung inward and Amos Quadland came in. He saw Sutton and came straight forward.

"Sutton," he said, "I want to apologize about yesterday. I've just learned that you *are* new to this country and probably hadn't seen barbed wire before."

"Sutton," exclaimed Ned McTammany, "is your name Sutton? *Jim* Sutton?"

Quadland answered for Sutton. "Yes, Sheriff Wagner just told me. And, uh, Mr. Sutton, I think I understand about the gun. Why you threw it down."

McTammany said thickly, "Jim Sutton of Missouri."

"Yeah," said a harsh voice at the door, "Jim Sutton of Missouri. And your name ain't in the Book!"

Sergeant Welker and Johnny Buff of the Texas Rangers came into the saloon, their eyes fixed on Jim Sutton. Ned McTammany moved hastily away. But Amos Quadland remained where he was.

Sutton leaned carelessly against the bar, so his left elbow touched lightly. His right hand remained dangling at his side. He watched the two Rangers approach, with a familiar sensation in the pit of his stomach.

The Rangers separated as they came into the room, so that Welker was to the left of Quadland and Buff to the right. They approached to within a dozen feet, then as if by arrangement, both stopped.

Sutton said, "What do you want?"

"You," Welker replied. "You're un-

der arrest. Put up your hands—or fill them!"

"There's no charge against me, in Texas," Sutton said. "And I doubt if you have a warrant."

"I don't need a warrant to arrest a known outlaw," retorted Welker. "Throw up your hands, or—" His hand streaked for his gun.

Jim Sutton seemed to shudder. Before the shudder was completed he was leaning toward the left. His Navy Colt appeared in his hand, as if by magic. It thundered and Johnny Buff winced in pain. Sutton's second shot muffled the sound of Buff's gun hitting the floor.

It was beautiful revolver work. The Rangers were tough men. They knew Jim Sutton by name and had nevertheless come against him—had drawn their guns. And Sutton had disarmed them both, without killing either. Buff had a bullet through his wrist, Welker one in the right shoulder.

The gun didn't drop from Welker's hand. But Welker was thrown off balance by the unexpected bullet smashing into him and before he could recover, Jim Sutton stepped forward and covered his head.

"Drop it, Welker!" he snarled.

Welker knew death when he saw it. He knew, too, that Sutton had spared his life with the first bullet. There was no need, therefore, to sacrifice it needlessly by being stubborn. Welker let his gun fall to the floor.

Johnny Buff was clutching his bleeding right hand, with his left. He said through clenched teeth, "You're the first man who ever beat me, Sutton. I didn't think it could be done!"

"You still want to arrest me?" Sutton asked icily.

Welker stared at him and wet his lips with his tongue. "Yes, Sutton," he said, "we've got orders."

"To arrest *me?*"

"To arrest all outlaws in Texas."

"But you can't now," Sutton snapped.

"*We* can't, maybe," Welker said, "but there'll be other Rangers along. You'd better—start riding."

Sutton slipped his revolver into the holster, then circled around the Rangers and started for the door. Amos Quadland, breathing heavily, fell in beside him. They passed through the swinging doors together.

On the sidewalk, Amos Quadland placed a hand on Sutton's shoulder. "Sutton, I want to thank you, about yesterday. I know now that you could have killed me."

"It's all right," Sutton said. "It wasn't—" He winced.

Major Fraser was standing on the sidewalk, across the street, staring at Jim Sutton and Quadland.

"Oh-oh," said Quadland. "Fraser won't—"

That was as far as he got. Across the street, Major Fraser whipped out a long-barreled Frontier Model.

"Fraser!" cried Sutton. "Wait!"

But Major Fraser wasn't going to wait. The gun in his hand roared and a bullet smashed into the false front of the saloon behind Sutton and Quadland. It was poor shooting, for the bullet missed them by more than six feet.

Sutton started across the street. Then a gun behind him roared and Major Fraser cried out and fell to his knees. Sutton, aghast, whirled.

Amos Quadland, gun in hand, was staring stupidly at Sutton. "I didn't—" he began.

Sutton groaned and ran across the street. Major Fraser was on his knees,

bracing himself on the sidewalk with his hands. Blood was staining the right leg of his trousers.

He twisted up his face as Sutton's boots pounded the wooden sidewalk. "Sutton," he said bitterly, "get out of my sight before I kill you."

Helen Fraser's voice sobbed behind Sutton. "Get away from him, you—you murderer!"

White-faced, Sutton turned to face Helen Fraser. Her face had the utmost loathing on it as she returned his stare. Stiffly, he walked across the street to his horse, mounted it, and rode out of Wagon Wheel.

Chapter Four

The Hill Men

A WEEK ago Jim Sutton had been riding toward the hills. His eyes had been so intent on them that he had been scarcely aware of the green valley through which he passed. The hills had meant sanctuary. Rest.

He had been delayed and during that time he had come to know the valley. Now he did not want to ride into the hills—and had to.

They were bleak and forbidding. They seemed to have been created by a gigantic hand that had torn up huge handfuls of earth and rock and tossed them down willy-nilly, as if in anger or spite. There was no rhyme or sense to them. Gullies ran here and there, as often as not ended against blind walls of rock.

There was, however, a trail of sorts leading into the badlands. Sutton gave his gelding its head and the animal picked its way along. He had been riding for an hour or so in the badlands and was becoming ill-tempered from the roughness of the journey when a man suddenly stepped out from behind a huge boulder.

He was a whiskered, evil-looking man in ragged clothes, but carried a fine repeating Winchester in his hands and had twin Frontier Models slung low in holsters on either side.

"This'll be far enough, Mister," he said.

Sutton was not surprised. "I'm looking for Nick Fedderson," he said.

"Why?" said the man on the ground.

Sutton looked at him intently, but did not reply. After a moment the man with the rifle shrugged. "All right, go ahead, but if you want to see Nick make a lot of noise. It'll be healthier."

It was good advice and Sutton kept his gelding on rocky ground when he continued. He was stopped again a half mile farther along, this time by two men who had horses grazing near by. They caught them and, mounting, followed close behind Sutton.

Sutton was impressed by the caution of the outlaws and his estimate of Nick Fedderson went up. Another mile and he was challenged a third time. The man behind him answered the challenge and a few minutes later the trail ended suddenly in a tight little valley of seven or eight acres.

A dozen crude shacks built of logs were scattered around the valley and at least thirty men were loafing about the clearing.

The men behind Sutton rode up then. "Better start thinking up answers," one of them said to Sutton.

They led the way to the largest of the cabins, before which a man was seated in a chair made of canvas and a

cutaway barrel. He was a lean-faced, hawk-eyed man with long, drooping mustaches that almost concealed a cruel mouth. He was about forty.

Sutton's escort turned their horses and rode back the way they had come. Sutton dismounted from his gelding and calmly sat down on the ground.

The lean man studied him for long seconds, then finally snapped: "Well?"

"I'm Jim Andrew," Sutton said.

Nick Fedderson spat out a mouthful of tobacco juice. "I've been expecting you. You can go right back."

Jim Sutton made no reply and Fedderson bared stained teeth. "You heard him. We don't want you here. You've got McNelly's Rangers after you as well as the crowd out in the valley. You're too damn hot and I don't want you here."

Sutton said, "I figure I'll stay."

Fedderson's face twisted in sudden anger and he half rose from his barrel chair. He fell back again, when Sutton's right hand dropped carelessly to his side.

Fedderson stared at Sutton a moment. Then he said, "What's your real name? It ain't Andrew."

"No," Sutton said, "it isn't."

Fedderson's swarthy face darkened. "Don't get me sore, Andrew," he cautioned. "You may be a bad hombre from where you came, but there ain't no Sunday-school kids here." He turned his head and barked, "Luke!"

A man who had been sprawled on his back some distance away came lithely to his feet and approached. He was a slender, clean-shaven man in his late twenties and carried a single Navy Colt, stuck in the waistband of his trousers.

Sutton's eyes fixed themselves on the gun, before they went up to the man's face. Then he inhaled softly.

"Jim," the newcomer said. "Jim Sutton!"

"Luke Vickers," Sutton replied. He got up and moved forward to grip the outlaw's muscular hand.

Nick Fedderson came up from his chair. "Did you say Jim Sutton, Luke?"

Luke Vickers let go of Sutton's hand and turned on his chief. "Yeah, Nick, this is Jim Sutton—of Missouri."

Nick Fedderson's mouth hung slack for a moment, then he forced a sickly grin on his face. "Why didn't you say who you were, Sutton?"

He held out his hand. Sutton ignored it and the outlaw chief let it fall to his side. His face began to twitch. "Fellow church members," he said sneeringly.

"Cut it, Nick," Luke Vickers snapped. "I haven't seen Jim Sutton since we were with Maximilian in '66. I—Jim, there was some talk that you'd gone to France with the Foreign Legion."

Sutton nodded. Yes, he'd left Mexico with the Foreign Legion. They had been good men—so good that Louis Napoleon had sent them against the Prussians, at Sedan when the day was already lost. They had died—most of them.

Fedderson said, "All right, Sutton, you can stay. As long as you remember that Nick Fedderson's running things in these hills."

"That suits me, Fedderson," Sutton said coolly. "I never have cared about running anything."

Fedderson nodded. "Things ain't like they used to be. Hell, man, I was here before the war. We never saw anyone from one month to the next then, except maybe some damn-fool greasers who didn't know any better'n to try to cross through here. I made a mistake

when I let the ranchers come in out there. I figured at first it was easy pickings. And it was. They didn't miss a few steers now and then. But now, damn it, you don't even know who's a spy for McNelly and who isn't. For all I know, you might be one."

"Easy, Nick," Luke Vickers said sharply. "This is Jim Sutton. I knew him—"

"Yeah, I know," Fedderson said impatiently. "You knew him when you were both riding with Jesse James during the war. But why the hell ain't you been with Jesse since then?"

Luke Vickers's eyes glowed softly. "You know I've never been back to Missouri, Nick. I never had any hankerin' for it, but if I'd wanted— Oh, hell, don't get me riled, Nick, that's all I got to say!"

"Some day, Luke," Fedderson said darkly, "I'm going to forget that you've been around here a long time." He broke off suddenly, turned on his heel, and went into the log cabin.

Luke Vickers touched Sutton's arm and gestured for him to follow him away from Fedderson's cabin.

They went to a gnarled oak tree some fifty yards away and squatted in the shade. Vickers said then, "How long since you've seen them, Jim?"

"Them, Luke?"

"Yeah, sure. Jesse and Frank. Cole and Clell—"

Sutton shrugged. "Several months ago. There aren't so many of the old faces in Missouri, these days."

"I know. A lot of them never went back. But— Jim, an old newspaper comes even down here once in a while. I've been readin'—and hearin'—about you and the others. Well, hell, Jesse was just a kid, then. I don't know's I'd have guessed it of him. Several of the boys were tougher—Arch Clements, Peyton Long, Sam Hilderbrand—there was a blood-thirsty Dutchman! And Donny Pence. How that kid could shoot! I've heard of that jayhawker who calls himself Wild Bill. Donny Pence could shoot rings around him."

"You weren't so bad yourself with a Navy gun," Jim Sutton said softly.

Luke Vickers grinned. "I've been keepin' the old hand in."

"I gathered that from Fedderson. You've got him buffaloed."

Vickers shook his head quickly. "Uh-uh. Don't be fooled by Nick. He's the Old One hisself. They don't come any worse than Nick, when he's crowded. I've seen him in action."

Sutton was silent for a moment. Then he said, "What's going on here, Luke?"

"What do you mean?"

Sutton looked out over the little valley. "All this. It looks to me like the bunch is pretty well organized—under Nick Fedderson. What's the purpose behind it?"

Vickers frowned, then grinned wryly. "I guess it's peanuts, Jim, but—well, we've been doing some rustling for years. It's only a few miles to the border, you know. In the old days Mexican smugglers would come across and we'd clean up on them. The damn fools never seemed to know when they had enough."

"But *now*," Sutton said, "something bigger's in the wind. It's got to do with the situation in the valley. Fedderson's name comes up pretty often."

Vickers's face clouded. "Frankly, Jim, I don't know. I've had a hunch for some time that Nick is up to something, but he hasn't told me what it's about. He's been going on some rather mysterious trips, I know. Some of the

boys have been talking about it. They're a bit skittish. Rumors about McNelly have been coming in. They say he's got spies everywhere and that no one's safe any more—anywhere."

Nick Fedderson came to the door of his cabin and cocked his head to one side as if listening. Sutton, watching, turned his eyes eastward and saw a horse and rider coming at a gallop over the trail he had himself covered not so long ago. He was amazed at the acute hearing of the outlaw chief. Undoubtedly, Fedderson had heard the galloping hoofs while still inside his cabin. Sutton himself had been unaware of them.

Fedderson waited until he could recognize the approaching rider, then stepped out into the clearing and waved to him. The man swerved his horse toward Fedderson, brought it to a sliding halt, and bounced to the ground. He ran to Fedderson and talked earnestly for several minutes. The outlaw nodded his head several times.

"Something's up," Luke Vickers said in a low tone to Sutton.

Fedderson turned toward Vickers and Sutton, seemed to hesitate a moment, then came toward them.

"It's come, Luke," he said, "the word I've been waitin' for. McNelly's moving into Wagon Wheel with a whole damn company of Rangers. They're pretending that things in the valley have got out of hand, but actually they're going to beat these hills. You know what that means."

"What the hell, Nick," Vickers snapped. "McNelly hasn't got enough men to come in here."

"The hell he hasn't," sneered Fedderson. "He's got a hundred men. Most of our bunch are rabbits. They'll run at the first shot. I know every man in these hills, and I say that we won't stand a chance when McNelly comes. You want to remember, too, that the valley folks will throw in with McNelly. We try to fight them, they'll shoot us down to the last man. I've been expecting this for a long time. I've seen it coming—and I've made plans."

"Plans, Nick?" Vickers asked softly.

"Yeah. Mexico. Diaz has his hands full down there and he isn't going to bother much about a bunch of *gringos* who come down there, particularly if said *gringos* have their pockets full of gold."

Vickers laughed. "What gold?"

Fedderson looked steadily at Vickers, then shifted his glance to Jim Sutton. "The gold we're going to take with us. Like I told you I've seen this coming and I've made plans. I've been afraid maybe McNelly would come too soon, but he hasn't. I closed the deal yesterday. Gonzalez is coming tomorrow with the down payment." He moistened his lips and his eyes gleamed. "The down payment on twenty-five thousand head of cattle."

Sutton inhaled sharply, at the same time that Vickers exclaimed in astonishment. "Twenty-five thousand head!"

"At thirty dollars each," Fedderson said. "Three-quarters of a million dollars. And all we have to do is deliver the cattle across the river."

"Who," asked Sutton, "is going to buy twenty-five thousand steers?"

Fedderson chuckled. "Not that it's any of your business, Sutton, but it's a government in the West Indies. A large island. This Gonzalez is their agent. He's been around and discovered that steers would cost him sixty dollars apiece delivered in New Orleans. I don't know what he's going to

do with the rest of the money, but I made a dicker to deliver the stuff on the south side of the river and he takes it over there. He pays us $100,000 tomorrow and the balance when we deliver across the river. What do you think of that, boys?"

"I think you're crazy," said Luke Vickers. "You'd never get twenty-five hundred steers, let alone twenty-five thousand."

"Wrong, Luke," said Fedderson, "the game's played out here. The boys haven't got anywhere to go but Mexico. I figured they'd like to have some money with them. More money than any of them ever had in their lives. What do *you* think, Sutton?"

Sutton shook his head. "It smells, Fedderson. I'm not in it."

"Uh-uh, Sutton. You are in it. Everyone in the hills is in it. If you don't believe it, stick around here after we're gone and see if you can convince McNelly that you had nothing to do with it."

Sutton knew that Fedderson was right. It was a mad scheme, of course, yet—it might succeed. Three hundred outlaws, three hundred desperate men, united in a gigantic coup that had to succeed, because their lives were at stake in it. Well—

Fedderson turned away from Vickers and Sutton and spoke in an undertone to the messenger who had come galloping into the outlaw hide-out. The man mounted his horse quickly and rode off the way he had come.

Fedderson turned back. "In five minutes no one's going to get out to spill anything. Luke, spread the word. Sutton—I want a word with you."

Luke Vickers hesitated and looked at Sutton. The latter shrugged and Vickers went off. Sutton said, "All right, Fedderson."

The outlaw scrutinized Sutton for a moment, then sighed wearily. "Sutton," he said, "I've got to trust you. I may as well tell you I know everything you've done from the moment you had that brush with Welker and Buff. I've had reports on you."

"From Ned McTammany?" Jim Sutton guessed.

Fedderson scowled. "All right, from McTammany. I've had a half dozen men outside for a long time. Had to. Rounding up the stuff isn't going to be half as hard as you might expect. I'll know exactly where it is." He cleared his throat. "In fact, the boys in the valley have helped. The trouble is going to be to hold the herd together and fight off McNelly at the same time. It's going to be touch and go. McNelly isn't expected in Wagon Wheel until the day after tomorrow. But Welker and a half dozen of them are here now. We can handle them and the ranchers."

"Yes," said Sutton, "I imagine that the trouble between them and the nesters was helped along by you. For this business?"

Fedderson grinned. "Smart, eh? I grab the cattle and let the ranchers and nesters fight each other. Maybe they'll both turn on McNelly. I hope so. But we've got to figure on fighting McNelly. Some of the boys will do that while the rest handle the herd. The job's going to be to hold off McNelly until the herd's across the river. I want you and Luke to handle that end while I look after the other. Luke will pick the men to go with you."

Sutton looked steadily at Fedderson and thought, *I spent eleven years finding these hills, because I was tired of fighting. And here's the biggest fight*

I've ever gone into. Well—it'll probably be the last.

Aloud he said, "Fedderson, I don't think you're going to get away with it, but as you say, we've got to fight one way or the other, so—"

Fedderson frowned at Sutton. "I'm counting on you. You and Luke. If you handle your end, I'll guarantee my end won't fall down. And remember, your share won't be buffalo chips. It'll make some of your pal Jesse James's hauls look like chicken feed."

Chapter Five

Raid

ALL day long, Harvey Fraser sat on the veranda, his wounded leg propped up on a stool. His eyes stared straight ahead out over his bunkhouses and corrals, his vast rangeland, but he saw nothing of what he was looking at.

Helen Fraser came and went during the day, but did not stop to talk to her father. There was no use, as long as he was in such a frame of mind. He had to think it out for himself, decide whether or not she had betrayed him. He was convinced that the men who had attacked him had been Sutton and Quadland; Sutton, whom he had befriended, and Quadland, whom he had suffered because of the friendship of his daughter and Fraser's.

Fraser had forbidden his daughter to see Susan Quadland. She had disobeyed him and, by that act of disobedience, betrayed him. It was a miracle that he had only a bullet in his leg. Quadland—or Sutton—had aimed higher, of that Major Fraser was sure. And the hand behind the gun had been his own daughter's.

Ambrose came out to the veranda at noon and informed the major that his lunch was ready. Fraser waved him away.

Ned McTammany came later to tell him about a couple of steers that had torn themselves on the barbed wire and Fraser merely stared coldly at him until McTammany went away, muttering to himself.

Dinnertime came and Ambrose set the table as usual, put food on it. Helen Fraser sat down to the meal and could not eat. She pushed back her chair, went out to the veranda.

"Father," she said, "I'm going away tomorrow."

Major Fraser's eyes did not shift from their sightless stare. Crimson flushed Helen's face from her throat to her hairline. She started to turn back to the door and then her father snapped a single word at her. "Quiet!"

Shocked into silence, Helen heard it then, too, distant, rapid gunfire. In the west. The hills were too far away, so it had to be somewhere on the Fraser range.

"Get McTammany," Major Fraser ordered curtly.

Helen ran toward the bunkhouses. It was suppertime for the hands and most of them were in the mess shack, one of the adobe buildings where a Chinese cooked for the hands. But McTammany was not there.

"Where's McTammany?" Helen asked of the group at large.

"Ain't seen him all afternoon, Miss Fraser," one of the men replied.

"He said somethin' about checkin' on the stock in the west section," another man offered.

Helen ran out of the house, back to

her father. "McTammany isn't here. Is there—is there anything I can do?"

Major Fraser groaned. "Something's up, I tell you. There's been more dust over there in the west than there has a right to be, without any wind to speak of. Damn this leg. Something's happening out there. Send Skaggs over here."

Helen went back to the mess house and found Skaggs, a bandy-legged cowboy who acted as foreman whenever McTammany was away. She was returning to the main house with him when they saw McTammany come up on a loping horse.

Skaggs said shortly, "You won't want me, now," and returned to the bunkhouse.

Helen waved at the foreman. "Ned! Father wants to talk to you right away."

McTammany dismounted from his panting horse and threw the reins over the animal's head. He walked toward the veranda.

Major Fraser called to him when McTammany was still some distance away. "Ned, what's going on out there, toward the hills? I've been seeing dust."

"Stampede," McTammany said laconically. "Couple of nesters been scarin' up steers."

"That's not so, McTammany!" the major snorted. "That dust has been rising for two hours and it's bunched. It's not a stampede, but the movement of a large, close bunch of steers."

"I've just come from that way," the foreman said steadily.

"Then you're lying, McTammany!"

McTammany half-turned from his employer and looked at Helen. The latter returned his look, wide-eyed, pale.

"All right," McTammany said, "then I'm lying. Which means I'm going, Fraser." He pivoted on his heel and walked toward his horse.

Major Fraser called sharply to him. "Hold it, McTammany, you're not going off like this, without answering—" The major's face twisted in sudden anger as McTammany paid no attention to him. "Helen! Call Skaggs, the men—"

McTammany swung up into his saddle, rode between Helen Fraser and the bunkhouses. "Don't you do it," he said curtly. "Or somebody's going to get hurt." His manner was savage and Helen Fraser recoiled before him.

McTammany muttered something at her, and swung his horse westward. Almost instantly, however, he wheeled back and started off in the opposite direction. Helen saw the reason—a pair of horsemen several hundred yards away, bearing down upon the ranch from the west and north.

"Helen," cried Major Fraser, "get my gun. Call Skaggs—the men!"

Helen remained where she was. The approaching riders had come close enough for her to recognize one of them—Amos Quadland. And the other was Machamer, who was, outside of Major Fraser, the largest rancher in the valley. It was a strange duo, coming to the Fraser ranch.

Major Fraser saw them now and half rose from his chair, but pain from his wounded leg made him gasp and fall back. Helen saw the grim look that came over his face.

The horsemen came up, dismounted, and walked toward Major Fraser. Machamer seemed to be the spokesman. He said:

"Fraser, do you know that Nick Fedderson's moved out with his entire gang and is stripping the range? Do you know that?"

Major Fraser's eyes flashed fire. "Damn you, Machamer, what in the world are you saying?"

"I know that Ned McTammany is in with Fedderson," Machamer retorted. "So is the man you called Jim Andrew."

"That man," cut in Amos Quadland, "is the notorious Jim Sutton of Missouri. Do you deny that you knew that?"

Major Fraser's mouth became a thin straight line. "Jim Sutton is a former Confederate soldier. I knew that. I did not know that McTammany was in cahoots with Fedderson. Not until—" he nodded westward—"not until three minutes before you men pulled up here."

"Fraser," Machamer said ominously, "I don't believe you."

"Call me a liar?" Major Fraser snarled. "Why, damn you, Machamer! You come here with Quadland, who is in league with that same Sutton who shot me yesterday, and you accuse *me* of being in cahoots with him? Get off my place!"

"We're going," said Machamer, "but we're declaring ourselves right here and now. That bluff of them taking your stock along with ours don't go. Captain McNelly's bringing in a company of Rangers and we're throwing in with them. Get that, Fraser!"

"Helen," the major said grimly, "step inside and bring out my gun."

"Father!" Helen Fraser cried. "And you men—listen! This has been as much of a surprise to us as it is to you. Father knew nothing about McTammany. Not until just a few minutes ago. I heard it myself. You're making a mistake, all of you. Mr. Quadland, my father believed you had something to do with what happened to him yesterday. That's why he—"

"He can believe what he likes," Amos Quadland retorted. "He's accused us farmers right along of doing things that we didn't do. He's said—"

"Skaggs!" Major Fraser roared at the top of his voice. "Bill Skaggs, come a-running!"

Skaggs, who had already been loafing in the doorway of one of the bunkhouses called something over his shoulder to the cowboys inside and came acros the ranch yard at a fast run. Before he had covered half the distance, men spilled out of the bunkhouse.

Machamer and Quadland drew back from the veranda. Machamer said coldly, "All right, Fraser, if you want to play your hand like that—"

"I do," snarled Fraser. "Now climb on your horses and git! My men start shooting in thirty seconds."

They didn't, of course, but by the end of the half minute Machamer and Quadland were beyond revolver range. Fraser addressed his men then.

"Boys, Ned McTammany sold us out to Nick Fedderson. They're cleaning the range of stock and it's my idea they're going to run it across the river. I'm—" He stopped because of the rumble that went up among the cowboys.

Major Fraser nodded. "It's going to be a fight, boys. Fedderson's got a big crowd with him. But they're going to have their hands full, rounding up that stuff. If you hit them quick and hard—"

"What're we waiting for?" Bill Skaggs cried.

The cowboys stampeded. They rushed for the bunkhouses and corrals, to get guns and saddles. Inside of two minutes, they were galloping past the ranch house, a wild, howling band.

A smile played over Major Fraser's

lips and he finally relaxed. Then he seemed to see Helen Fraser for the first time that day. "Helen," he said, "I'm sorry. It wasn't your fault. I see that now. It was that damn Sutton—and the others."

"It wasn't Jim Sutton, Father," Helen Fraser said in a low voice.

"What? How do you know?"

"I know, because—" She couldn't say the rest, but her father knew. He pursed his lips and whistled.

"So that's the way it is! Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"But you know he's *the* Jim Sutton? You heard that a little while ago."

"I know," Helen Fraser said. "I guess I've known ever since I saw him. I—I don't understand it."

"Neither do I," her father said. "I was so sure of him. You see, I've never thought as badly of those boys as some of our soldiers did. General Price always spoke well of them. And since the war it wasn't easy for them, back there in Missouri. Harder than it was for us in east Texas, for that matter. I thought when he came here, well—that he was here because he wanted to quit the old life. And I figured to give him his chance."

"But you didn't, Father," Helen said dully. "You took him on as a gunman."

The major winced. "Maybe I did—at that. But it wasn't for that alone. I knew we were in a fight and I wasn't thinking of him as a gunman any more than I was of any of the hands. You saw how they rode out of here just a minute ago, didn't you? You wouldn't say they were just going out to kill someone, would you? Of course not, they're going to prevent our property from being stolen. If they've got to fight—"

It sounded logical, the way her father put it, but there was nothing logical about warfare. There was nothing in it except grief and death. Helen Fraser turned and went into the house.

Chapter Six

The Deserter

THERE may have been three hundred outlaws in the hills, but less than two-thirds of that number responded for the muster and general exodus. Some, no doubt, preferred to play it their own way.

Nick Fedderson was coldly furious when he saw the small number. "Not enough," he muttered, "not enough for the job. There's going to be hell to pay if McNelly comes up too soon."

He brought out a crudely drawn map and spread it out before a half-dozen selected men. "This," he said, pointing with a thick calloused finger, "is Wagon Wheel Valley. The different ranches are marked here. See—Fraser's, Machamer's, and Welch's. I haven't bothered to mark the little places, because there're too many and they're not worth while bothering with unless they're in the way. The big numbers are here, and—" he paused to moisten his lips and look around—"and these little circles are where the herds are. Some of the boys on the outside have seen to that. Like here on Fraser's place. We can count on eight to twelve thousand head here alone. Ordinarily, they'd take us three weeks to round up, but—uh, someone's done the job for us already. Fraser thinks the herd's going up the trail to Kansas." He chuckled wickedly.

"Take everything," he went on, "but don't stop for cripples. We're going to be crowded and speed's the thing that'll win for us. I guess I don't have to tell you that McNelly hasn't been *arresting* many outlaws and—he'll be here tomorrow. We want to be across the river by then!"

Fedderson turned the map over to the selected roundup leaders and walked swiftly over to where Luke Vickers and Jim Sutton were waiting with a force of between forty and fifty well armed horsemen. Fedderson nodded approvingly.

"You know what you're to do, boys? The fighting's up to you. The rest won't have time; they've got to prod the herd along. Remember—it's a big game and it may be a tough one. It's you boys who're holding the aces."

"Cut the speeches, Nick," snapped Luke Vickers, "and let's be going."

Fedderson swore with high good humor. "You're fightin'-mean, Luke! That's fine. Just keep thinkin' of that gold you're going to have tomorrow and you'll come through all right. You too, Jim Sutton. Give them what you gave the Yanks up in Missouri."

They were off, then, with Luke Vickers and Jim Sutton heading the troop. As they rode along, Vickers said, "Doesn't this remind you of old times, Jim?"

"It does. Of one time. When we rode to Lawrence."

Vickers swiveled his head sideward and looked sharply at Sutton. "Why Lawrence?"

"Because we did a good job then. We made a hundred widows and two hundred and fifty orphans."

Vickers winced at the bitterness in Sutton's tone. He was silent for a moment, then said, "Your heart's not in this, Jim."

"Heart?" said Sutton. "I haven't had a heart since '63. But I've got eyes and ears. I can see dying men—and I can hear crying women."

"Cut it, Jim," Luke Vickers snarled. "Cut it out. How the hell do you think I feel? My home's up there in Missouri. I've got a family there that I haven't dared go to see in eleven years. Look what they did to you and the others. You've been living in caves, hiding like animals. Don't talk to me, Jim, about dying men. You and I have been dead for years. But there's a chance—with this money—to come alive again. Somewhere else. In South America, maybe. I'm going through with it and the devil with anyone who throws down a gun in front of me."

Sutton had been afraid of that. He'd known ever since Fedderson had revealed his mad scheme that he couldn't be a party to it. He'd hoped to win Luke Vickers over. He'd failed.

They rode through the hills to the green valley and there the detachment broke into a half dozen units. Each unit striking off in a different direction to perform the task assigned to it, by Fedderson. Only the force under Vickers and Sutton remained intact and this one headed straight for the center of the valley, there to maneuver and be in a position to protect any of the smaller units that might be attacked by numbers large enough to hinder their work.

They moved openly, for their numbers were too large to conceal anyway. Fedderson's hope for success was in his numbers and boldness. The ranches were large and scattered. The nesters dotted the valley, but they were isolated spots that could not be expected to offer any resistance.

Yet it was a nester who drew the first blood. Riding in the wake of one of the roundup crews that had swept along the farmer's two cows, the fighting force was fired upon with a rifle. An outlaw was wounded in the arm and cursing, immediately charged the farmer, who took shelter behind a wagon. He fired a second time and the outlaw toppled from his saddle.

Vengeance was swift and spontaneous. A half-dozen men broke from the main body, galloped down upon the wagon in a wide fan, and riddled the farmer with revolver bullets. They were all for burning the man's house and barns, but Vickers, backed up by Sutton, prevented it.

"The smoke'll warn others," Sutton advised. But he was sick at heart. This was Missouri all over—a well-armed vicious band of men making war upon isolated, unprotected individuals, justifying themselves because the victim was desperate enough to try to protect his meager property.

But there was nothing Sutton could do—yet. He was one of fifty men. Although given nominal co-leadership, he was actually the cynosure of all eyes. He could not even desert. Not without being instantly killed.

It was still an hour to sundown when Ned McTammany and Nick Fedderson came galloping out from a clump of cottonwoods.

"Head for the west, two miles," Fedderson cried. "Fraser's herd is over there and his men are heading for it. It's going to be a fight but we've got them beat two to one."

The troop wheeled to the left and went into a trot. Ned McTammany fell in beside Sutton. "Kinda surprised to see me in with the boys?" he asked.

"No," Sutton told him. "I guessed there was something crooked about you the first time I saw you."

McTammany's face darkened. "Those are rough words for a man like you to spout."

"So?"

McTammany muttered something under his breath and spurred his horse ahead, so he caught up with Fedderson. Sutton saw him talking angrily to the outlaw chief and knew that McTammany was complaining about him. But nothing came of it, at the time. There was grim work ahead. Just ahead, too, for the troop had topped a rise in the ground and was going downhill toward a grove of cottonwoods. Horsemen could be seen at the edge of the trees, but as the outlaws neared, the Fraser cowboys retreated into the cover.

There were at least twenty-five of the Fraser cowboys, opposed to twice that many outlaws. And the cowboys had the advantage of position.

Fedderson and Luke Vickers fell back to Sutton. "How do you think we ought to fight them?" Fedderson cried. "I don't want to risk a frontal charge until I get up more men. And we're crowded for time."

Luke Vickers said, "I figure we ought to split and have half the boys flank them from the woods."

Sutton shook his head. "That might not work. While half the men were flanking them, the Fraser outfit might get the idea of charging the rest of them out here. The odds'd be even, but—will our side stand up under a charge?"

Fedderson scowled. "Some will, some won't. They'll fight better if they've got the edge."

"Well," said Sutton, "the answer seems obvious then. Don't fight at all.

The herd's out in the open. Why not just start driving it south? Then if the Fraser men want to fight they'll have to come out, after us. And they'll have to do the attacking. One-third of this bunch can handle the herd, the other two-thirds can cover the retreat—and hold off the Fraser men!"

Fedderson exclaimed in satisfaction, "Of course, that's the best way. Swell, Sutton! I'd just as soon not fight if I don't have to."

Sooner or later Fedderson would have to fight, but Sutton wanted to postpone it until the odds were a little more even, until there was a stronger chance of Fedderson going down, even though he fought with last-ditch determination, as he surely would when the going got really tough.

The men turned left from the Fraser front and with wild yelling attacked the assembled herd of steers, almost stampeding them.

It was two or three minutes before the Fraser men divined the intent of the outlaws, then it was another minute or two before they emerged from their concealment.

The outlaws formed a strong rear guard, trying as nearly as they could to space out at intervals of fifteen to twenty feet. The cowboys charged.

The outlaws met the charge with a withering revolver fire that emptied two saddles and drove the rest of the cowboys back to a safe distance, out of revolver range. At that time the outlaws should have launched a counter-charge, but no one gave the order and they contented themselves with retreating slowly behind the herd.

The sun had already gone down and twilight was settling upon the range. Far to the north Sutton heard sporadic firing, and a little later to the east, also, indicating different detachments of outlaws who had met resistance.

They were still skirting trees on the west in their southward march and as the shadows grew longer and vision more obscured by the falling darkness, Jim Sutton eased over to the west.

Ambrose served supper at the usual time, but neither Major Fraser nor Helen had any appetite and made but the slightest attempt to eat. They were waiting for news. And dreading it. The entire Fraser personnel had galloped out to fight the outlaws that threatened the Fraser ranch with extermination and they had not returned.

After the pretext of eating, Major Fraser adjourned to the darkened veranda where Helen followed almost immediately. Major Fraser cursed steadily. Finally he could contain himself no longer.

"I wish now those blasted Rangers *had* come," he exclaimed. "They'd ride rough-shod over us, but at least we wouldn't be having this kind of thing. When I think that some of the boys—" his voice faltered a moment—"may be—hurt—I'm about ready to give up everything."

"Why hasn't at least one of them come back to report how things have gone?" Helen Fraser questioned. "They must know that we're anxious about them."

"There's no one to give orders," Major Fraser said. "Skaggs was never given much of a chance and—maybe he's been hurt."

Helen Fraser stepped off the veranda and moved several feet out into the ranch yard. Her attitude suggested listening and Major Fraser, who could see her in the shaft of light that came through the window, exclaimed, "What

is it, Helen?"

"A horse," she replied. "Galloping—coming this way!"

"At last!" the major cried. "They're sending word." Yet there was an uneasy note in his voice and he grasped his long-barreled Frontier Model .44.

"Helen," he said, "I think you had better go inside. Just to be—on the safe side."

The galloping horse had come close now and before Helen could obey her father it shot into the shaft of light in front of the house and slid to a halt. A man jumped from the saddle, came toward Helen and her father.

They both exclaimed in astonishment when they recognized the newcomer. It was Jim Sutton.

"You!" the major cried hoarsely. "Why—" Involuntarily he brought up the Frontier Model.

Sutton saw light gleam on the barrel and said quickly, "Hold it, Major! I've got some important information that may help you save your herd."

"I'll bet you have," Major Fraser jeered. "What is this, another trick?"

Sutton shifted quickly from Fraser and faced Helen. "Listen," he said, "I haven't got much time. I've got to tell you. And you *must* believe. Your men couldn't hold off Fedderson; there weren't enough of them. There aren't any single outfits large enough to hold him, because he's got almost two hundred men."

"You're crazy!"

"All right," said Sutton, "but your men haven't returned. They're foolishly tagging along behind Fedderson, not strong enough to bother him much. The other ranchers and the farmers are fighting little individual battles and not doing anything. That's wrong—all wrong. You've got to unite, your own men and the others. And you've got to stop Fedderson, where he can be stopped—in the hills! I've seen his maps and I know where he's going. There's a place about fifteen miles from here, where he can be halted—maybe licked. But you can't do it without at least a hundred men."

"Sutton," the major said ominously, "I advise you to clear out of here, at once, before I shoot you down like the dog you are."

"Don't!" Sutton exclaimed, "I don't give a damn for myself, but you—and all these men in Wagon Wheel Valley—you're licked unless you all get together and make a united effort."

Helen Fraser cried out in alarm. "They are coming—Jim! You'd better go—quickly."

Sutton had already heard the drumming of hoofs. He knew his peril, but he could not go until he had made another effort to convince the stubborn Fraser of his sincerity. He said earnestly:

"Believe me. I'm telling the truth, Helen. Go to Quadland. *He'll* believe."

"You and Quadland," the major said thickly. "Damn you!"

"Father!" Helen said sharply. "He's telling the truth. Susan told me. He surrendered his gun the other day, so as not to kill Mr. Quadland. Mr. Quadland admitted it yesterday, and—"

It was too late to escape now. The thunder of hoofs drowned out Helen's words. A small cavalcade of shadowy horsemen galloped into the ranch yard. Sutton whipped out his Navy Colt and then a voice from the darkness roared:

"Hold everything! We're Rangers!"

Sutton inhaled softly. For him, these men were as dangerous as Fedderson's outlaws.

Horses milled about in the ranch

yard and then two men walked into the shaft of light. One of them was Johnny Buff, with his right arm in a sling. The other was a tall, fierce-eyed man who wore a gun at each hip, butts turned forward.

"McNelly," he said in a crackling voice.

Major Fraser exclaimed in a relief-flooded voice. "Thank the Lord!"

"Ha!" said Captain McNelly. "I didn't expect to hear that from what I've heard about you, Major Fraser."

"I didn't expect ever to say it," Major Fraser replied fervently. "But I am saying it now. And I'll repeat it—thank the Lord for the Texas Rangers! You got your company with you?"

"No," snapped McNelly. "I haven't. But they'll be here by morning. Sixty of the best fighting men in Texas. Right now, I've only got these men with me. But I understand you've got thirty men here. I want to swear them in—"

Fraser groaned. "They're not here. They're out fighting Fedderson."

Johnny Buff raised himself on his toes and said something inaudible into his superior's ear. McNelly shifted toward Sutton.

"You, Jim Sutton, what do you mean shooting up my best men?"

Sutton made no reply. McNelly glowered at him. "What are you doing *here?* Buff told me you'd gone into the hills."

"I came back," Sutton said, "to tell Major Fraser how to stop Fedderson—"

"He's lying, Captain McNelly," Major Fraser snapped. "Don't trust him. He—he shot me only yesterday and now he's trying to lead you into a trap."

Captain McNelly turned abruptly to Helen Fraser. "What do you think, Miss? Is Sutton to be trusted?"

Without turning to look at her father, Helen replied, "Yes."

Major Fraser opened his mouth to exclaim, then clamped it shut. McNelly turned to Sutton.

"What's your plan, Sutton?"

"It's just this: Fedderson has his outfit split up into a half-dozen units, with one strong fighting force that's supposed to range wherever it's needed. But the entire bunch will converge upon the trail leading through the hills. I've seen his map and there's a pass, fifteen miles from here, where he can be stopped with a good force."

"But how the devil are we going to get past him? He's already entered the hills. He can beat us to the pass."

"No, he can't. He's got twenty thousand head of steers with him—he can't get there before morning. You could cut across a couple of ridges and get there two hours sooner. Here—"

Sutton stooped and with a finger drew several quick lines in the ground. "Here are the ridges, and here, winding through, is the trail Fedderson must take with the herd. He can't cut across the ridge with the cattle, but horses can, and if you'll take your men across here, you'll be at this—" Sutton drew a short, straight line—"at this place by sunup. You can stop Fedderson here, with fifty men."

"But I haven't got fifty men," snapped McNelly. "I don't even know if I can get them. The ranches I've passed between here and Wagon Wheel are stripped of fighting men. I'd hoped to pick up a force here."

Major Fraser said, "My men are chasing Fedderson. We can catch up with them and pull them off, then make the flank and cut across the ridges."

Sutton suddenly relaxed. The ma-

jor's statement indicated that he finally believed Jim Sutton. He looked up and Helen Fraser was staring intently at him.

Captain McNelly said, "All right, Major, get your horse. It'll be up to you to get your men and send them after me. Sutton—" The Ranger walked back into the darkness and Sutton followed.

A steely hand gripped Sutton's shoulder. "Listen, Sutton, Fraser's men alone won't be enough to fight Fedderson in that pass. Maybe we can hold them awhile until my own men come up, but—I'm going to need some help. I want you to go back to Fedderson."

"But I can't!" exclaimed Jim Sutton. "He knows I've deserted. He'll—"

"Kill you?" snarled Captain McNelly. "What the hell do you suppose the law is going to do to you, when this over? Damn it, you're Jim Sutton of Missouri!"

"Yes," Sutton said dully, "I'm Jim Sutton of Missouri. I'd almost forgotten that."

"Don't!" the Ranger captain said fiercely. "Don't ever forget it. You're through. And you might as well do something, to pay back what you owe. I want you to go back to Fedderson and stop him! Understand?"

Chapter Seven

Trail's End

JIM SUTTON rode through the night and shortly before dawn settled down on a steep hillside. He saw the sky turn gray in the East and began to distinguish objects after a while.

It was then that he saw he had come, in the darkness, to almost the exact spot he had selected, the narrowing of Fedderson's little valley, at the south end. It was really a canyon, with steep, sloping sides and no more than fifty feet wide at the bottom.

By this time, Captain McNelly, united with the Fraser cowboys, would be some two miles farther down the canyon, where it narrowed, according to Fedderson's map, to no more than a dozen feet. There, entrenched, McNelly could fight Fedderson.

But Fedderson had to be delayed. McNelly's main force would not get to Wagon Wheel Valley before dawn and it would take them another three hours then, directed by Helen Fraser, to get to this point, crossing the ridges. Fedderson had to be held in the canyon until mid-morning by a force that was only one-sixth his own.

The sun came up and Jim Sutton studied the cabin-studded little valley that had been Fedderson's headquarters for so long. It was empty of life now, but it wouldn't be for long.

A low rumble that shook the earth like a subterranean murmur told Sutton that thousands of longhorns were approaching, long before he heard the bawling of the cattle.

The first he saw of them was a cloud of dust far up the narrow defile. After a few minutes he saw the wave of steers, a long, narrow sea of them. There was only one direction for them to go now, ahead. The outlaws had fallen back, bringing up the rear.

It took more than an hour for the vast herd to pass Sutton's vantage point, behind the boulder, part way up the steep slope.

The outlaws came behind, a straggling company of them, without any more formation than the longhorns

nad had.

Sutton could not see where their numbers had been decreased any during the night of savage roundup and sporadic fighting, although here and there he could see a man with a bandage about his head, or an arm in a sling made of clothing. Luke Vickers, who rode at the head of the column with Fedderson and Ned McTammany, had a rag about his forehead, although the other two were conspicuously unmarked.

Sutton stepped from behind his boulder, mounted his gelding that had been standing patiently near by, and rode down the slope to meet the outlaws.

When he was only halfway down, Luke Vickers spied him. He said something to the others and the trio halted. Guns leaped into hands.

"Hold it!" Sutton cried. "It's me—Jim Sutton!"

"I see you," snarled Fedderson. "A dirty traitor!"

"Traitor?" cried Sutton. "Have Fraser's men been dogging you since last night? Who do you suppose took them off your back?"

Fedderson squinted at Sutton. "What are you getting at? You claim that you got rid of them?"

"Of course," Sutton lied. "I convinced them the place to fight you was at the river—fifteen miles above where you're going to cross."

"He lies, Nick," cried Ned McTammany. "Fraser would have shot him down on sight. He thinks—well, he thinks Sutton winged him in Wagon Wheel day before yesterday."

"He doesn't," Sutton snapped. "He knows it was you who shot from the door of the saloon. He and Quadland have got together. They know *you* were making all the trouble between them."

Nick Fedderson turned from Sutton and shot a quick look at McTammany's face, then swiveled back to Sutton. "Why'd you go last night, Sutton, without telling me what you were up to?"

"I was afraid you'd think I was trying to dodge a fight," Sutton said. "Anyway—I didn't know whether my scheme would work. But it did. Even McNelly fell for it."

"McNelly?" cried Fedderson. "You saw him? He's here?"

Sutton nodded. "We met him as we were going back to Fraser's ranch. Another half hour and he'd have been on your tail—with a hundred Rangers. Now, he's waiting down by the river."

"Don't you believe him, Nick!" McTammany yelled. "McNelly would have killed him on sight. He downed those two Rangers in Wagon Wheel and no Ranger would forgive that."

"McTammany," snarled Sutton, "you're asking for it. Reach for your gun!"

A palsy shook McTammany. His face paled and he recoiled in his saddle, mumbling.

"Well, McTammany?" Sutton insisted. "Am I lying?"

"Go ahead, Mac," Luke Vickers urged. "Put up or shut up!"

McTammany was tongue-tied. He knew that Sutton wanted to kill him, that even if the others threw down on Sutton, the latter's first bullet would get him. He shook his head and backed away.

Fedderson said grimly, "All right, Sutton, come along. It's only ten miles to the river. Let's hope McNelly isn't there."

And McNelly wasn't at the river. He was no more than two miles down the canyon; the point of the herd had al-

ready passed him by this time. When the entire herd had gone by—the showdown would come.

There was no need to herd the steers through the canyon; there was only one direction for them to go and they moved steadily along. The outlaws followed in their wake, strung out carelessly.

Nick Fedderson stuck to Sutton like a burr. When the latter rode ahead a few feet, Fedderson followed. When he fell back, the outlaw chief was right by his side. His disappearance the night before, his dramatic return this morning, had cast doubt upon him.

Well, it didn't matter. In just a few minutes, Sutton was going to reach the end of the trail.

He saw it ahead, the canyon narrowing as it passed between cliffs that were almost sheer. The longhorns had slowed up, as they passed through the tight passage, but now they had cleared it.

Zing!

The first bullet whined over the heads of the outlaws. It was followed instantly by a solid volley that rocked the canyon.

"Sutton!" screamed Nick Fedderson. "You damned traitor!"

The outlaw chief's gun was clearing leather when Jim Sutton's bullet almost lifted him from the saddle. Sutton swiveled to pick out Ned McTammany and his eyes passed Luke Vickers's stunned face, came back—and then Luke Vickers fired.

Luke had acquired his revolver skill in Missouri, during the bloody years. He fired instinctively, without aim, as did Sutton himself. And his bullet went true.

Pain exploded in Sutton's side, a paralysis enveloped him, and before he was aware of it, the ground rushed up to meet him. A haze danced before his eyes, but it was wiped away for an instant to show him Luke Vickers's white face.

Sutton's Navy Colt bucked his palm and when next Sutton saw Luke Vickers he was on the ground, only a half dozen feet away. He was on his hands and knees and blood was rushing from his mouth.

"Jim," he gasped, "they've got me—the Feds!"

Sutton heard no more. Blackness swooped down on him.

Once more Jim Sutton had awakened in this room with the whitewashed walls and ceiling, the cool white sheets on the bed. It was the first bed he had slept in in years. But this time—a soft, cool hand brushed his forehead and shocked him instantly awake.

He said to Helen Fraser, "What happened? Did McNelly—?"

"Captain McNelly?" Helen Fraser smiled softly. "He's gone. But he said there was no charge against you, in Texas."

"Fedderson? McTammany? Vickers?" Helen Fraser shook her head. She'd heard the tale from her father two days before. Leaderless, the outlaws had scattered into the hills, where McNelly's Rangers had hunted them down, one by one.

He said to Helen Fraser, "Why am I here?"

Her blue eyes were shining. She said, "Where did you expect to be, Jim Sutton?"

Not here. For this was Trail's End. He'd always thought it would be in a cave, or thicket—or bleak desert. He had never hoped for *this!* But—he was glad.

THE END

Free-for-All

TOM W. BLACKBURN'S novel, "Hired Guns and Badlands Beef," featured in this issue of ZGWM, has been screened by Warner Brothers as a Technicolor special and will be released soon. Tom himself did the screen adaptation. We've been informed that its present movie title, "Along the Santa Fe Trail," is subject to change. Author Blackburn has been very active in film work lately; Warners recently released his "Colt .45," also in Technicolor, and his novel, "Short Grass," has been purchased for production by Monogram. All of which sounds like busy times and mounting success for Tom. ZGWM readers, enjoying "Hired Guns and Badlands Beef," and recalling some of his other fine stories, will no doubt join us in hearty congratulations.

• Frank Gruber, author of "Ride No More," is a screen writer too, specializing in Westerns. Last March he was writing "The Texas Ranger Story" for one studio during the day and "The James Boys Ride Again" for another at night—siding the law half of his working time and riding with the outlaws the other half. And that without showing any signs of split personality! Frank did the screenplay for the Randolph Scott thriller, "Fighting Man of the Plains" (based, naturally, on Frank's book, "Fighting Man"). Sometimes he writes the original story but not the screenplay ("Dakota Lil"), or the screenplay from someone else's story ("The Cariboo Trail"). Somehow, we get the impression Frank likes to work! In his spare time he negotiates with radio and TV networks interested in broadcasting or televising one or another of his three mystery series, Johnny Fletcher, Simon Lash, or Otis Beagle.

• "Loco Like a Lobo," the latest of the Paintin' Pistoleer hilaritales, presents Rimfire Cudd's brother Chewie as malefactor-in-chief. And they thought the pore ol' coot was "crazy"—crazy like a fox! (or see title). Author Walker A. Tompkins has another'n coming up soon.

• W. Lee Herrington's "Dead Man's Gun" is his first ZGWM yarn, which

of course calls for an introduction. Lee was born in 1903—during a blizzard, he says—in a small Kansas town. His pa was a Kaintuck, his ma a York Stater. Moved to Missouri when he was two; went to school for a while, but was always feuding with the teachers who he claims used to thump him for being left-handed and apparently unchangeable. He became a telegraph messenger, then, at fifteen, a "brass pounder" in a remote Kansas outpost. He fibbed his way into the Navy at sixteen and after two years as a radio op was honorably discharged into a depression-ridden world. He drove an oil-tank truck, was a jewelry salesman ("Why did I ever give *that* up?" he wails), a boilermaker's helper, then wangled a reporter's job on a small daily that promptly folded. He found there was little money in county-fair dirt-track auto racing, migrated to Kansas City, Mo., and learned the sign business (still left-handed). He continues:

"Married a swell gal who thought I could write; war came along and I turned writing idea over to wife who promptly sold where I hadn't. Defense plant during war, lettering Air Force refuelers; wrote, edited, reported, did safety articles, and managed to find time to be staff photographer for plant morale mag. Abandoned sign-writing business (lucrative) in '47 for story writing (less lucrative) and not too sorry. Always wanted to do a Western that was more about people and less about cows—'Dead Man's Gun' is it."

• "Pensioned Off," the little tale by Raymond S. Spears was the last story Ray wrote. He completed it shortly before his death last January. It's a flavorful yarn, as were all of Ray's.

• A recommended addition to the Dell Book pocket-edition series: *Gunpowder Lightning*, by Bertrand W. Sinclair, the story of a Texas-born feud that blazes up again in far Montana.

—THE EDITORS

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TRAP LINE

BESIDES the many other chores of a line camp in the winter months, a cowboy sets out his trap lines. He eradicates the man smell from his traps by cleaning them in a lye solution, then sets them with old cowbait and puts them out at spots where he knows that cattle are apt to drift to. The wolves get fat and sassy during the winter when the cattle are weak and can't put up much of a fight. Small calves, especially, are liable to fall prey to 'em.

In this instance the trap and bait worked fine; the trap-line puncher has caught him a great big lobo. He will shoot him; usually he hits him over the nose so's he'll bleed to death fast. When marten or other valuable fur-bearing animals get caught in a wolf trap the cowboy always hits them over the nose so's not to ruin the pelt, which a shot would do. A trap line pays off in bounties, collected when the cowboy turns in the ears. And every wolf or coyote caught during the winter months adds up to several cattle saved for the outfit—in fact, it may mean the difference between profit and loss.

DAN MULLER

VERDICT: Now it was not murder in the second degree, and was not murder in the third,
The woman simply dropped her man like a hunter drops a bird!